

Liffey Champion

By Tim Ryan, Oireachtas Correspondent

Murphy critical of decision to overturn Celbridge Local Area Plan

The Minister of State Damien English's decision to overturn decisions made by Kildare County Council on the Celbridge Local Area Plan has been received very negatively, Social Democrat Deputy Catherine Murphy told the Dáil.

“People wonder what the point is in the public process that they are encouraged to engage in when it is a foregone conclusion,” she said. “The decision is pretty much made in the Custom House. Utterly disheartened people have contacted me. Some say they are contemplating moving because of the mess that will be made of the town and the total disregard for the views of the public from which there have been thousands of submissions. People have questioned the point of electing councillors when the real power lies with the council CEO and the Custom House. This is not a rogue group of councillors. They have respected the process and listened and engaged with the public but that has counted for nothing. Democracy is sullied.”

Following thousands of submissions from the public, she said people who value their heritage, the Council rezoned the land in Donaghcumper demesne as strategic open space. The Council CEO had proposed zoning for a town centre extension. “The Minister of State has overruled the councillors and instead says that the Donaghcumper site is centrally located and is the most appropriate location for town centre zoning for future commercial retail and other related facilities. This site is small, at 6.5 ha. It is not a gigantic site but it is important.”

In reply, Minister of State English said the simple fact of the matter is that Celbridge is a strategically located town within that fast growing cluster of towns including Maynooth and Leixlip and is earmarked to grow by about 10,000 people over the next five to ten years.

“We have to ask if we want Celbridge and towns like it just to be dormitory towns, full of commuters but with no commercial heart,” he said. “Celbridge has a very weak, some say declining, but historic town centre. All I am trying to do is to uphold national policy in ensuring that the one small area it can grow into is not lost forever. If I did not do my job and allowed local planning policies to make these kinds of decisions, in the future those local communities would regret the situation they would find themselves in having to provide the shops and services they need at the edges of their towns and, worse than that, maybe not in those towns at all but in neighbouring towns. It will be important to get the balance right on the development of the centre of Celbridge.”

“We will need to respect its historic urban and landscape character,” he added. “I believe we would benefit from really well designed new housing right in the centre, to give new life to it and create new footfall for its struggling main street, the vitality of which should be the key focus. I emphasise that this is also to support that main centre. I have been on that street and many businesses there have seen a decline in business over the years because people cannot access it. This plan would put some housing right beside it and I support that.”

There will also be a new public park and riverside amenity, which will be a major attractor for the town centre, he said. “We need to get working on putting this into practice. The land that was previously zoned a number of years ago has much less housing. There is also a portion of land that has been handed over which was owned by the local authority since 2012, which can be developed as a top-class amenity and park and protect the character of the landscape and the house and lands there.”

Criticism of loophole in tenancy laws

The need to ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between the rights and interests of landlords and tenants was raised in the Dáil yesterday by Dublin Mid West Sinn Féin Deputy Eoin Ó Broin.

He told the House that the amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act, which were rushed through the House last December, introduced a loophole that, as the Taoiseach knows, allows landlords to issue notices to quit where they are undertaking substantial renovations.

“Threshold has expressed serious concern that this loophole is being abused and is being fraudulently used in as many as 12% of current cases of notice to quit,” he said. “Is either the Taoiseach or the Minister considering reviewing this and bringing forward amendments to close this loophole to protect tenants?”

In reply the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government Eoghan Murphy said he would bring forward a definition. “We are at the final phases of clarifying that at present to close that loophole. If that needs to be put on a legislative footing, we will do that as well.”

Lawless seeks increased investment in research and development

Ireland is at the bottom of the European league table in terms of research and development, North Kildare Fianna Fáil Deputy James Lawless told the Dáil.

“This week is Science Week, and we all share a belief in the fundamental value of research, innovation, discovery and teaching,” he said. “We want to be positive about this, particularly in Science Week. However, we must also be realistic and, unfortunately, the rhetoric is not always based on fact. The Government’s Innovation 2020 programme commits to a goal of 2.5% of GDP funding for research and development by 2020. We are barely halfway there. We hit 1.42% recently. The Nevin Economic Research Institute flagged this earlier this year as a serious risk to our economic progress.”

Deputy Lawless asked the Taoiseach how he proposed to address this gap. In response the Taoiseach said the figure the Deputy mentioned is 2.5% of GDP. “That is €5 billion,” he said. “That is a lot of money and the country has many demands and other priorities at present, not least housing and some of the other issues others have raised. I cannot give the Deputy a timeline for this. What I can say is that we have moved from 30th place in the world in science and innovation up to tenth place, so we have made a lot of progress.”