Consultation on Statement of Strategy for Department of Transport Tourism and Sport 2017 -2019

To: Department of Transport Tourism and Sport FAO: Jennifer Cullen August 5th 2016

From: The Western Rail Trail Campaign

The Western Rail Trail (WRT) campaign is the umbrella name given to a union of community groups in the West of Ireland campaigning for the alignment of the closed railway line from Athenry in county Galway to Collooney in County Sligo to be utilised for the benefit of communities along the route as a greenway (walking and cycling trail) until such time as a railway, if ever, becomes possible. The entire 127 km route is referred to by the campaign groups as the Western Rail Trail (WRT)

This submission on the new Statement of Strategy for Department of Transport Tourism and Sport 2017 - 2019 is based on a pre-budget submission made to the Department in October 2015 which can be referenced by the Department.

The implementation of The Western Rail Trail greenway will reflect government policy in respect of a national cycle network and sustainable transport.

The voluntary groups supporting the WRT include: Sligo Greenway Co-Op Ltd., Sligo-Mayo Greenway Campaign, Swinford Vision for the Future, Energise Tuam, Athenry Revival Group and Athenry Tourism. A full list of individuals, businesses and organisations who supported the pre-budget submission of October 2015 may be found in that budget submission.

The WRT campaign groups, individuals, businesses and organisations call upon The Department of Transport Tourism and Sport and Department of Finance to support this submission in considering the new Statement of Strategy for Department of Transport Tourism and Sport 2017 -2019 based on the following seven points.

1. The route of the closed railway line from Athenry county Galway to Collooney in County Sligo is a vital state asset which must be protected from loss to the state. Portions north of Claremorris are at imminent risk of being lost to public ownership through adverse possession and need to be protected from squatting.

2. The international best practice for protecting closed railway alignments in public ownership is to utilise the routes as greenways (walking and cycling routes), until such time, if ever, that reopening as a railway is feasible.

3. If converted to Greenway, the route would remain in the ownership of Irish Rail on the strict proviso that if a railway order is ever issued, a railway henceforth would take legal precedence on the route. Irish Rail publically endorses this way of protecting closed railway alignments; most recently in the case of the closed Navan-Kingscourt line in Meath.

4. The route of the WRT would become an integral part of the National Cycle Network – helping fulfil government policy to complete an integrated, fully connected National Cycle Network. Connectivity of a cycling network is critical for tourism.

5. The WRT would fulfil one of the objectives of the 2014 CEDRA report on Ireland’s rural economy. CEDRA identified unused rural pathways and railways as assets with huge capacity for development in rural areas (CEDRA page 68)

6. TEN-T Transport planning strategy formally passed by the EU parliament, November 2013, identified rail and road infrastructure projects to be funded in Europe as far ahead as 2030. The railway line from Athenry to Collooney was not included as a core route in TEN-T European Transport policy. Only core routes included in the TEN-T policy are likely to receive EU structural funding. Utilising the route as a greenway until European TEN-T Transport is reviewed again for the period post 2030 will ensure the route is protected as a potential rail route in the ownership of Irish Rail until 2030.
7. Over 20 million Europeans take cycling holidays each year, few if any of them come to Ireland because we lack the necessary infrastructure. The WRT, creating connectivity between a Dublin-Galway Greenway, a Collooney-Enniskillen greenway, and the Great Western Greenway would provide a critical mass of trails to attract this market segment.

**Based on the above, Western Rail Trail Campaign submits that the following three objectives to be included in the Statement of Strategy for Department of Transport Tourism and Sport 2017 -2019**

1. The Department of Transport Tourism and Sport to support a feasibility study for a greenway along the route of the closed railway line from Athenry in County Galway to Collooney in County Sligo by the end of Q1 2017.

2. The study would examine connectivity between the Western Rail Trail and the Great Western Greenway in Mayo, the Dublin–Galway greenway at Craughwell/Athenry and the proposed Enniskillen-Sligo Greenway in Sligo. It’s frame of reference would be similar to other such feasibility studies already completed on closed railways in the ownership of Irish Rail, for example the feasibility study on the Navan/Kingscourt railway.

3. The study should include a cost benefit analysis in respect of: rural tourism economics, job creation, health benefits, disabled access, local amenity value, sustainable transport, prevention of pedestrian fatalities, VAT, PRSI and income tax intake and social welfare savings as a result of economic activity associated with the WRT.

For and on behalf of the Western Rail Trail Campaign

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