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To: Offaly Co Co.

Title: Tullamore Harbour Masterplan – Submission

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Below please find the IWAI's submission regarding the Tullamore Harbour Masterplan. IWAI welcomes the opportunity to submit to Offaly County Council's Draft Development Plan for the Tullamore Harbour complex. We feel there is considerable potential and opportunity to breathe new life into the Harbour Complex and open it to the public. But, given that funding streams may derive from the Urban Regeneration Fund, opportunities to develop and improve services for both Greenway and waterways users are vague and somewhat overlooked.

1. Introduction & IWAI History

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) was established in 1954. It has 24 branches across the 32 counties of Ireland, with some two thousand members. It represents the navigable waterways with its vast heritage, a wide range of members interests regarding inland waterways use and

activities, community interests, navigation issues, waterways tourism development, all in relation to the socio and economic benefits of the waterways. Our national membership spans both boat owning and non-boat owning members of the general public.

IWAI has a long history of working with statutory agencies, funding groups, and community interests with regards to promoting access to the waterways. In recent years this has taken the form of working with Waterways Ireland – the navigation authority and government Departments in relation to legislative reform regarding byelaws on the inland waterways and working with Fáilte Ireland to develop tourism experiences on the waterways. IWAI also undertakes large infrastructural refurbishment projects such as the regeneration of the Boyne Canal in Co. Meath and the Newry Canal. IWAI also supports Special Interest Groups such as the CSIG which has undertaken a digital national mapping and charting project of much of the Shannon, Erne, Royal Canal, Grand Canal and Barrow Navigation. In late 2018, as a response to the severe difficulties encountered by boating users of the Grand Canal and Royal Canal, which collectively along with a partial route on the River Shannon form the **Green and Silver Route**, a special interest Nav-Watch¹ group was established within the Canal branches of IWAI. The purpose of this group is to constructively contribute to the knowledge base regarding access to waterways, their navigational maintenance, development and use from a boating perspective. Sharing this information with the relevant agencies for the betterment of these navigations.

2. Tullamore Harbour Master Plan – Overview

From an architectural perspective the plan, though bold, falls short of it's potential. Offaly Co Co has long aspired to add high-rise buildings to Tullamore's skyline and this has been imagined here, but at what cost. The high-rise structure to the south east of the site and immediately south of the spur line (positioned where Waterways Ireland's offices currently are) will cast long cold shadows on the harbour in the mornings and right down the spur line for most of the day. If water borne activities are to be encouraged, as the plan suggests, then it is imperative that sunlight hours on the water be maximised.

The site is small, too small for the inclusion of these two tall buildings, this is a considerable design issue. Where is the parking for residents of these buildings? We note that it is intended to CPO the private dwelling in the south west corner and use that space as an entrance to the site. This is an excellent idea and an obvious thoroughfare from the main street. Why though, is there no plan to CPO the warehouses in the north west corner. These warehouses form part of the original extent of the harbour property and should be rejoined and redeveloped within the complex, alleviating some

¹ Nav-Watch – comprising expert members of Canals & Barrow branches of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland from the Royal Canal, Kildare, Dublin, North Barrow, Barrow, Offaly, and Shannon Harbour IWAI areas.

congestion on the site. The northern location of these warehouses would be a much better location for the high-rise building currently proposed to replace the Offices/Sheds on the south eastern corner of the site and immediately south of the spur line. Alternatively, this proposed building could be positioned to the west of the harbour where it's shadow would not negatively impact sunlight reaching the water, it would then only shade an area of Store St. and the car park to the side of the church.

3. Creating a National Tourist Attraction in the Heart of Tullamore

Currently the only tourist attraction of National significance in Tullamore is the Tullamore Dew Distillery. Unfortunately much of the tourist traffic to this attraction bypasses the town of Tullamore as buses take visitors directly to the facility and then away onward toward Dublin or Galway.

Ireland does not have a museum dedicated to our inland waterways, we are alone in that respect among European nations. **Tullamore with it's unique harbour**, having originally been the western terminus of the Grand Canal, **is the perfect location to house Ireland's National Waterways Museum.** Having a working dry dock on site and the possibility of a further exhibition/entertainment space in the second dry dock would add enormously to the potential of this facility.

P.67 of the Masterplan highlights the potential for boatbuilding workshops (though it is illustrated with scenes of costal currachs being built), the suggestion is still applicable to the inland waterways. In support of the idea of a National Waterways Museum for Tullamore, a centre of excellence focusing on our surviving heritage fleet could offer skills which might otherwise be lost. Rivetting, welding woodworking are all skills which can be preserved and passed on to future generations. This development could become a flagship or centrepiece to Ireland's Hidden Heartlands.

4. Developing, While Preserving Living Heritage

The greatest challenge here is to design and integrate the modern with the significant heritage of the site, without detracting from that heritage and while adding further function and facility. The dry docks and the harbour basin are listed structures which both deserve and enjoy a level of protection and consideration as working heritage structures. This respect for heritage should be accompanied by an understanding that the canal(s) cannot survive and flourish in waves over the centuries unless they are complete and are served by their full compliment of essential facilities. This includes their dry docks, which, in the midst of another flourishing wave, are increasingly in urgent demand.

It is comforting to see that on P.52 of the Masterplan a lifting bridge is shown at the entrance to the harbour, in other instances throughout the document this water level bridge is shown as a fixed structure. Anything less than a lifting bridge would render the harbour useless and undermine the heritage.

Access to the harbour for use of the dry docks needs to be simplified rather than discouraged. Both the Marine Act and the proposed Byelaws for the Inland Waterways require boats to be maintained to a given standard. With considerably more vessels on the canal(s) now than at any time during their trading days, it is imperative that the network of canal facilities originally installed for safe, regular maintenance of vessels be operable.

5. Include Essential Services now, to Secure the Future

The long term success or failure of this Masterplan will be measured by it's attention to detail and the quality of facilities built into the plan. Currently it falls down on the provision of services associated with the Greenways/Waterways. Given that both agencies responsible for these facilities are overlapping to some degree on this project, there needs to be greater communication and shared understanding of the current demands for these services.

Waterways Ireland is a key stakeholder in the delivery of the Government's '*Embracing Ireland's Outdoors' the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023 – 2027* and as such, has a vested interest in driving the development of Greenway/Waterway services. It is also in keeping with WI's published 10 Year Plan '*Reimagining Our Waterways*', which states "*The launch of Waterways Ireland's 10-year plan in November 2023 ignites a vision to create **inspirational inland navigations and waterway experiences**, making them more **sustainable and accessible through conservation and sustainable development.***"

Offaly Co Co may aspire to erect much needed high-rise accommodation in the harbour complex which will serve those fortunate enough to live there. The general public will want more than an opportunity to access and view the site, they also want much needed services for Tullamore which they can use daily.

Greenway/Waterway Services which should be included are:

- A. **Service Block** – The plan makes reference to the possibility of toilets outside the Harbour area on the spur line of the canal, this is too vague and uncertain. The Greenways have been a massive success and have attracted so many people to enjoy the banks of the canals. Services for these people are sadly lacking and toilets are the most basic of services. What is specifically needed here is a complete service block similar to those operated by WI on the Shannon. These

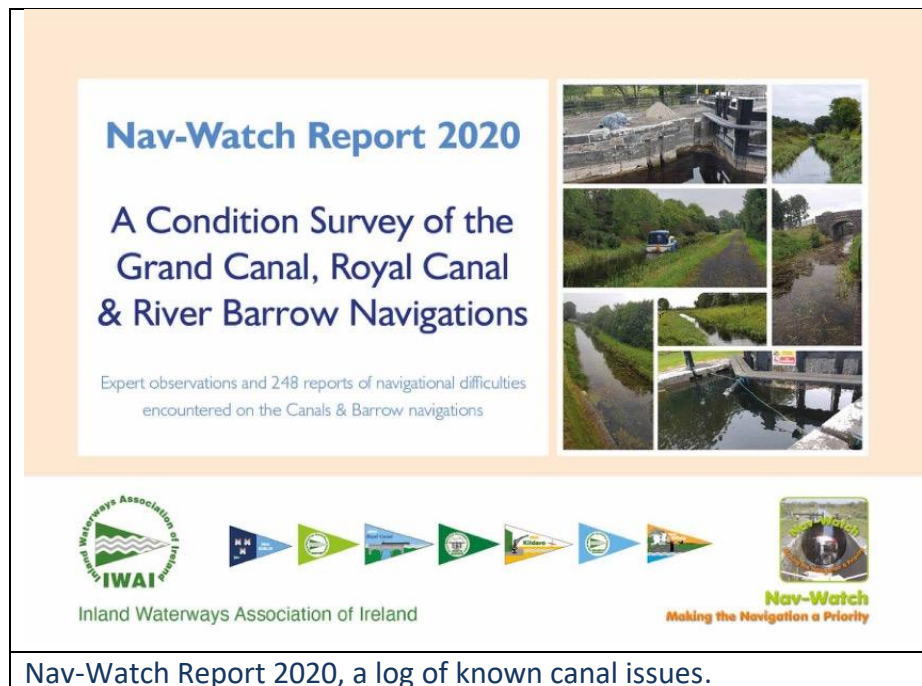
include drinking water, toilets and showers and should include refuse stations. These facilities will be used by walkers, runners, cyclists, kayakers, boaters and many more. Alternatively, this service block could occupy space on the ground floor of either of the proposed buildings and so serve visitors to the harbour as well as greenway and waterway users.

- B. **Dry Docks** – Much greater detail is required here outlining how the living heritage of the working dry dock will be incorporated into this plan. Vehicular access to the dry dock needs to be included. The spectacle of functioning heritage dry docks is a fascinating sight which should be a feature of the complex and could be accompanied by exhibition panels on Ireland's (Industrial) Hidden Heartlands. After excavation, the 'filled' dry dock could double as a performance/exhibition space.
- C. **Dedicated Liveaboard berths** – With the explosion of interest in living aboard barges on our waterways it is surprising that neither agency is advocating the inclusion of serviced berths on one side of the spur line or just outside it on the main line. This is probably the most affordable housing solution available in Ireland today; people invest in their own small home i.e. barge and rent a serviced berth from WI or the local authority.
- D. **Drinking Water** – There should be operable drinking water tap(s) on the spur line to allow boats to refill water tanks. Drinking water-bottle refilling stations should also be located on the spur and within the Harbour Complex.
- E. **Short Stay Serviced Berths** – Encouraging boat tourism and domestic boat movements on the canals relies on good maintenance and provision of services. The spur line should include short stay serviced berths to be used by rental and touring boats, all of whom can be defined as boat tourists and bring their 'spend value' to local businesses.
- F. **Pumpout Service** – A working pumpout facility will shortly be an essential service for all boats, the pending WI Draft Byelaws will require all boats to operate some type of holding tank for their effluent waste. This is then pumped out of the tank at a WI Pumpout. The existing pumpout has been out of service for many years and needs to be replaced with a fully functioning unit.
- G. **Bicycle Racks** – Cyclists need a place to secure bikes. At the end of a long cycle they should be in a position to lock a bike, use a toilet, shower and change clothes. Leave their bikes safely secured while they visit local restaurants or the harbour facilities.

6. Year Round Boat Tourism Potential on Our Canals

Since the downturn in 2008 a cash strapped Waterways Ireland has focused it's attention on areas where funding was available, i.e. the development of Greenways. These have been very well received by the general public. Now, there is considerable scope to develop boat tourism on both Canals culminating with a boat tourism hub in the city centre linking the canals. George's Dock, next-door to the wonderful EPIC Museum, has huge potential both as a liveaboard community and as a canal's quarter tourism hub.

Boat tourism on the Shannon is basically restricted to a seven month season, April to October. The canals offer the opportunity for year round boat tourism, cruising the canals is possible all year round (the winter months are termed Maintenance Season when works can result in localised closures, but generally the canals are open). Our warmer climate in recent years makes winter cruising on the canals all the more viable. The days are gone when the canal could be expected to freeze over for a period each winter. The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland's Nav-Watch group have recently surveyed the canals and documented areas where dredging or maintenance needs are greater (see/download Nav-Watch Report 2020: www.iwai.ie/nav-watch/surveyreport). It is hoped that this focus on critical maintenance will improve the navigation and leave it better able to cope with a variety of vessels travelling between Dublin and the Shannon.



Nav-Watch Report 2020, a log of known canal issues.

We take our canals very much for granted, they are just there, people are very surprised and always attracted and intrigued when they see a boat or barge pass by. The built heritage of these tremendous assets is largely overlooked. **Much of this 200+ year old system still functions well today, it is working living history.** The longest hand-made structure in this country is the 146km length of the Royal Canal, yet few people are aware of this. We find original bridges, locks and some buildings are added to each counties' List of Protected Structures. Yet none have taken the obvious step and list the structure of the canal cut which is arguably the greater achievement of our early 19th century canal builders.

Neglect

Looking at other capital cities around Europe we can see how much tourism has developed around their canals and waterway facilities. Water draws people to it, boats moving on that water have an even greater draw. **Everywhere in Europe that there are canals traversing cities and towns, there are thriving communities and vibrant tourism attractions built upon the back of that draw to water... except in Ireland where it has been neglected.**

Future-proofing the canals network

To fail to plan for the future life of the canals is to begin the process of decline and ultimately closure. IWAI's Nav-Watch was established to document problems and focus essential maintenance on critical issues by bringing them to the attention of WI. It is also a means to lobby Government for increased funding to allow WI to reinstate necessary programmes of maintenance and bring the state of the navigation back to where it should be, reversing the state of gradual neglect which had set in during years of budgetary reduction. Specific project funding and pressure from Councils will help to drive this appreciation and development of our heritage waterways network.

7. The Importance of Through Traffic

The potential here for developing a thriving boat tourism business is as great as it is in any other European country with a canal network. We have a canals network which is still operational in its original state, nothing has been automated, simplified, or plasticised. One has to travel to other countries to gain a true understanding of the value of this living history heritage. There are only a couple of barge hire companies operating on the canals and Barrow Line at present. Poor maintenance of the navigation hampers their clients and businesses struggle accordingly. There is great demand for these hire services and tourists who do come will frequently take a boat for a week, spending heavily on food and drink in the towns they pass through. The Nav-Watch group through their Report 2020 are lobbying government for an increased maintenance budget for Waterways Ireland so they may better maintain the canals

navigation in the future. (see Nav-Watch Report 2020, https://branch.iwai.ie/nav-watch/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2024/06/Nav-Watch_Report_2020_WEB.pdf)

The Spectacular *Green & Silver* Route

The '*Green and Silver*' route is based on the route taken on a documented triangular journey undertaken by L.T.C. Rolt in 1946. His subsequent publication of '*The Green & Silver*' book in 1949, is now its 7th edition and as a boating 'classic' has become a bible for canals navigation enthusiasts in Ireland and many visitors from overseas. Rolt was one of the founders of the Inland Waterways Association (UK) in 1946.

This Green & Silver waterways route between Dublin and the midlands², which is of huge potential for economic benefit and social activity for the regions it passes through. It comprises a waterways triangular route of the Royal Canal, a section of the River Shannon, Grand Canal and into Dublin (crossing the Liffey to get back to the Royal to complete the journey). This navigation route is of international significance, ignored by our tourism organisations, **it is the only circular boating route in Ireland and needs to be elevated to national planning status level to flourish**. This route runs right through Offaly and this harbour redevelopment provides an ideal opportunity to make Tullamore a significant stop-off point on the Grand Canal leg of the journey. **This is a spectacularly beautiful route and a bucket-list goal for many boaters. It's potential for development as a tourist route has yet to be realised**. To-date it has been the goal of the private boat tourist to complete this special route but the potential for commercial boat rental tourism remains untapped.

² Green & Silver Route - Dublin, Royal Canal, River Shannon, Grand Canal triangular navigation route.



Green & Silver route – the Royal Canal, The Grand Canal (crossing the Liffey in Dublin) and the Mid Shannon region. As yet this is an unexplored route for major heritage value/boating tourism.



Green and Silver book cover – comprised of the Royal Canal, the Grand Canal and the mid-Shannon. The route is approx. 320 km and can be completed in 10-12 days of continuous travel by boat, however it is preferable to take as long as you can.

Boaters who currently do this route in Ireland can register to take part in the Green & Silver logbook challenge, by which they get various passport style stamps on an old fashioned log book format; a certificate; and a polished metal plaque to mark their achievement. The Dublin branch of the IWAI have been the main drivers behind the promotion of this route and administer the registration, log book and plaque allocations. However it is also the users of the Green & Silver route who have contributed to it becoming known in the boating community over the last decade (only possible since the reopening of the Royal Canal) and it is an excellent example of ‘ground up’ grassroots user based perspective being able to contribute to regional development, once the relevant support and resources to push it on further are considered and applied. It is 70 years since the publication of the original book so it is timely that in 2024 it gains more exposure.

	
<p>Green & Silver Log Book</p>	<p>Green & Silver Certificate</p>

The Green & Silver route runs through nine of the twelve local authority areas – from Dublin City Council out the Royal Canal through Fingal, Meath, Kildare, Westmeath and Longford to the River Shannon (with access from the Shannon to the Camlin River – a particularly tranquil and secret spot on the overall navigation), back in the Grand Canal through Offaly, Kildare and South Dublin, with a spur line off in into Laois to access the River Barrow system. This route has the potential to be a major international level boating destination servicing both the city and the wider region and should be viewed as a collective resource with regard to its navigable future.

The canals network in Ireland is some 200 years old, and still functioning in much the same way as it is in the early 1800’s. Manually operated lock are still operated the same way, the canal banks ensure the immediate natural environment is available and local history and heritage is on its doorstep in the

many towns and villages through which the Green & Silver route passes. We are very good at presenting our nation's history through documentaries, drama, theatre and so on, but there is nothing that can evoke the actual real experience of canal boating except to undertake it. We constantly hear said by German and British tourists on our waterways ***"You have the best waterways in Europe, why don't you use them more!"*** In the case of the canals, this could not be more true. We have failed to invest in their tourist potential so far.

The Green & Silver route runs through large and small towns such as Longford, Mullingar, Enfield, Kilcock, Leixlip, Maynooth, Naas, Edenderry, Tullamore and Athlone. These can offer local boating route points e.g. weekend hire boats, to use the local areas of the Green & Silver from those locations. Small businesses in this area are starting up and indeed somewhat established - notably Royal Canal Boat Trips operating trips between Clonsilla and Kilcock on the Royal Canal; on the Grand Canal bargetrip.ie based in Sallins and more recently boattrips.ie on the Barrow adding to the long established Barrowline cruisers in Vicarstown. Also, as mentioned earlier, there are several hire companies on the Shannon that would be willing to send their tourist hire boaters into the midlands if they could be confident of access and reliability of use.

8. Conclusion

IWAI recognises Offaly County Council's need to create residential accommodation and open the Harbour site to the public. However, the opportunity to include much needed essential services to Greenway and Waterway users, including residential and visiting serviced berths, has been missed. This is short sighted.

Preserving the working heritage state of the dry docks is of equal importance and the potential for the development of a tourism destination of national importance in Tullamore should be explored fully.