

Re: Ref. No: ABP - 320938 - 24

Woodquay Park Enhancement by Galway City Council (GCC)

Submission from the Woodquay Residents Association (WRA) Galway

06/11/2024

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing on behalf of the Woodquay Residents Association (WRA) to formally object to the proposed Woodquay Park Enhancement Plan put forth by the Galway City Council (GCC). We ask An Bord Pleanála, to **refuse permission** for this project. Our community has serious concerns regarding the lack of meaningful consultation, the total disregard for the work we in WRA did on this project, health and safety implications, and the overall lack of clarity surrounding this project.

Background to this Submission

For the past few years Woodquay park has been neglected with broken seats, never repaired, a path of granite slabs, layer upside down and slippery but never fixed, the gates never locked at night as they always were in the past. In 2017 the Woodquay Residents Association (WRA) took this in hand. In our efforts to do the best for the park and our community including the schools, we research the parks history and mythology, we traveled to other counties and viewed their parks. We surveyed the park and drew up a plan and with all this information we took the next step. We consulted Ms Mary Reynolds, the Chelsea award winning renowned landscape designer. This consultation was at our own expense. We sent her our research and the survey of the park. Ms.Reynolds came to Woodquay. She spent time sitting and walking in the park. She saw the 100-year-old heritage Hawthorn hedge and recognised its environmental importance. She talked with us. From these interactions, she created a most beautiful design, with Biodiversity at its heart. We in the WRA were very pleased with the design and as a result had a scaled model made of it. This made it easier for our community and others to fully see its potential. We displayed the plan and model in the Town Hall Theatre for two weeks for all to see and give their feedback, we surveyed our community, we showed it to our City Council councillors and they were greatly impressed. Most importantly, we took into consideration the two local primary schools, St. Nicholas Parochial School and Mercy Primary School, that use the park on a regular basis. This is an extremely important amenity for both schools, with no green areas of their own. This is their Green Classroom. In 2018 we exhibited the plan and model to the Environment Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) in City Hall. In 2020/21 we had meetings with the Parks Department in City Hall to move it forward. In 2021 as a result of all this work done by the

WRA and, especially, Mary Reynolds's blueprint, Ms Carmel Kilcoyne GCC applied for funding to Fáilte Ireland. On the basis of this design and Mary Reynolds' reputation, in Sept 2021 the GCC received €1.2 million in funding to bring this design project to fruition. Once the funding was got, GCC took the project off the Park Department and it was given to Mr. Jack Houlihan, Senior Executive Engineer and Ruari Lehman, Tourism Officer, GCC. Then everything changed, A British company was employed, LUC. Mr. Ruari Lehman attended a WRA's meeting in Feb 2023 He advised us as key **stakeholders**, that we would be kept up to date every step of the way and given ample consultation, he assured us we would be contacted by the LUC designer. We received just one meeting with Mr. Lehman. After that we heard nothing until February 2024 a notice in the local newspaper advising of a public consultation. At this public consultation Ms Caroline Osborne park designer LUC was asked if she had ever visited the park, she said she had not.

In the 'Instruction to Tenderers' document from GCC it states on pg14 4.2 (H) heading 'The Project'

'All services shall be in line with the Galway City Council application to Fáilte Ireland, the letter of offer from Fáilte Ireland and the original proposal developed by the resident association of Woodquay for the redevelopment of the park.'

It would seem to the WRA that LUC have not followed this instruction by fundamentally ignoring Mary Reynolds design. Have they breached the conditions of this Contract?

1. Lack of Meaningful Consultation:

The WRA, as **key stakeholders**, have not been adequately consulted throughout the planning process. Despite assurances from GCC representatives, we have not been kept informed or involved in the decision-making process. The sudden unveiling of the LUC design, which differs significantly from the original Mary Reynolds design, without consulting the WRA or local schools, is unacceptable. The WRA's input and concerns have been disregarded, undermining the importance of community engagement in such projects.

2. Health & Safety Concerns:

The logic to justify the taking out of the Railings is dangerously and fundamentally flawed; it appears to claim that an 'inclusive' space must be 'open'. This seems to be a doctrinaire approach which sacrifices the safety of young children and other park visitors. This boundary-free approach will also increase anti-social behaviour. There are seven pubs within about 200 metres from the park, and late night drinkers are often looking for a friendly outside location to keep drinking and partying after closing time. How can we consider that this is compatible with proper planning and development in Woodquay?

The removal of railings and lockable gates surrounding the park poses a significant risk to the safety of children from the two nearby primary schools and a preschool who use the park regularly. It is not difficult to imagine a four-year-old running out of the park and into the

road if a parent or teacher is also looking after other children. Whatever happens on this planning proposal, we believe that the railings must remain. The railings provide essential protection from traffic and the nearby river Corrib, ensuring a safe environment for children to play and learn. Neglecting these safety measures in the proposed plan raises serious concerns about the well-being of the community, particularly the young children who rely on the park for recreational activities. This design was done with no consultation at all with the key **stakeholders**, the WRA or any members of our community, including the two primary schools. The WRA have spoken to the principles of both Schools, Ms. Wendy Lynch, Principle, St. Nicholas Parochial School. Ms. Evelyn O'Toole, Principle, Mercy Primary School — and we believe it is imperative that their voices are heard. They have informed us that they have not been part of any consultation regarding the LUC redesign of the Woodquay Park.

3. Lack of Clarity and Transparency:

The lack of transparency in the consultation process and the discrepancies between the original Mary Reynolds design and the proposed LUC design have caused confusion and frustration within the community. The failure to clearly communicate changes, such as the removal of railings, in the public planning notices attached to the park railings, further highlights the deficiencies in GCC's processes. Members of the public have been reading these notices; but it would be impossible for them to appreciate the extent of the changes (particularly the removal of the railings) by doing so. The notices include a list of 10 items ('litter bins' and 'bollards', for example) which do not communicate the vastness of the changes, and the transformation of the peaceful local park in a quite residential area, into a soulless plaza. The report itself continues this confusion. (Consultation Report Pg. 52) Revised Concept Design June. Woodquay Park, Proposed changes. There is a list of 20 changes with No mention of removal of railings. The public deserves clear and honest communication regarding any modifications to the park's design.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the WRA strongly objects to the current Woodquay Park Enhancement Plan presented by GCC. We urge the ABP to **refuse planning permission** to this application. We ask that Galway City Council reconsider this design which is unsuitable for Woodquay; That the funding that Fáilte Ireland gave GCC be used for what it was granted for -the original proposal and design by Mary Reynolds presented to GCC by the Woodquay Residents Association. We ask that it be reinstated to bring this forward with our community, Mary Reynolds and Emmet Humphreys Senior Executive Architect GCC and prioritise community input and safety, and ensure that any future developments here align with the needs and wishes of the local schools and the Woodquay residents which make up one of the oldest communities in Galway City.

For all the above reasons we ask An Bord Pleanála, to refuse permission for this project.

This surely is not proper planning or sustainable development. The effects on the natural environment of breaking up the green area, adding so many paths, will leave the park as a wet wasteland. Taking out a 100-year-old heritage hedge that the designers didn't even know was there (because they never visited it) This would have a significant effect on the park as a European Site. Taking out trees because they are in the way of a view. With the climate changing every tree is precious. The effects on the entire environment of Woodquay will change for the residents if this project goes ahead. This was to be a quiet meditative space where locals and visitors alike could go to get away from the noisy city. Not to bring the noisy city here. This was to be an enchanting space where children could learn and play in safety. We as a community want to keep our park.

Sincerely,

Diarmuid Croghan

Diarmuid Croghan,
Chairman, Woodquay Residents Association
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Galway,
H91 K072

Timeline

2017, the Woodquay Residents Association (WRA) worked tirelessly to create a beautiful nature-loving design for our small Heritage Park at the centre of Woodquay. This park had been neglected for some years and we have some problems with Anti-social behaviour. We engaged Ms Mary Reynolds, the renowned landscape designer. She spent time sitting and walking in the park. From this and from all the extensive research we gave her, she created a most beautiful and pleasing design. We had a scaled model made of it. We displayed the plan

and model in the Town Hall Theatre Woodquay for all to see and give their feedback, we showed it to our city councillors and they were greatly impressed.

Most importantly, we took into consideration the two local primary schools, St. Nicholas Parochial School, Mercy Primary School and the pre-school that use the park on a regular basis for nature studies and recreational purposes. This is an extremely important amenity for these schools, with no green areas of their own. The importance of the railings and the gates around the park from a Health & Safety aspect, for these young children is essential.

2018 we exhibited the plan and model to the Environment Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) in GCC. They again commended the design.

2021 as a result of all this work and, especially, Mary Reynolds's blueprint, Ms Carmel Kilcoyne GCC applied for funding to Fáilte Ireland. Sept 2021 the GCC received €1.2 million in funding to bring this design project to fruition.

2023 a British company was employed, LUC. Mr. Ruari Lehman GCC attended a WRA's meeting in Feb 2023 He advised us as **key stakeholders**, that we would be kept up to date every step of the way and given ample consultation, he assured us we would be contacted by the LUC designer to discuss the design. This did not happen. Months went by, and we continued to get no consultation.

2024 At the end of January, a notice in the local newspaper advising of a public consultation on the Woodquay Park in the Galway Rowing Club, Tuesday 6th Feb. We were shocked. We secured a meeting for February 2nd three days in advance of the public meeting. These dates are each side of a Bank Holiday Weekend. It was with great disappointment that we became aware that the LUC plan for an open plaza had been substituted for Mary Reynolds's design. The 2 designs have nothing in common.

Tuesday 6th Feb public consultation. This was not a consultation but a presentation of the finished product. The designer of this plan never visited Woodquay before this date.

June 2024 the WRA had it's first and only consultation with the GCC/LUC/MKO group. LUC had made small changes to their original design, but it was still a change from a peaceful local park in a quite residential area to an open and unsafe plaza.

We made our comments and sent it back to GCC on the Jul 4, 2024.

We heard nothing back. From what we can see, no changes were made to the design that is now with the ABP..

We in the WRA would be happy to work with Mr. Emmet Humphreys, GCC Senior Executive Architect to modify the Mary Reynolds's design, it was this design that secured €1.2 million in funding. It would also cost a lot less.

Background:

The Woodquay Park was made from infill of one of the channels of the river Corrib at the turn of the last Century. The upper part became the Potato Market as this was surrounded by

shops and bars. The lower half was turned into a garden park for the principal benefit of the local community of terraced houses with no gardens or open space. This is a small park surrounded by houses.

Woodquay is one of the oldest communities in Galway City, many of its residents are 4th and 5th generation. The Woodquay Residents Association was the 1st Residents Association to be formed in Galway City.

The Greater Galway Charter

In May 2024, The Woodquay community took part and was used as the Pilot Area for The Academy of Urbanism Conference, *Neighbourhoods: Planning, designing and delivering the 21st century neighbourhood*. Held in Galway.

The Greater Galway Charter four anchoring Principles that guide what the Galway should aspire to be as a City and a Place:

1. Sustainable: by looking long term, across generations, with a particular regard to physical, environmental and cultural assets, at a local, national and global scale.
2. Inclusive: by considering all sectors and ages of the current and future population, both as 'internal' residents, occupiers and businesses, but also as 'external' commuters and service users, visitors and investors.
3. Responsive: looking to adapt to future circumstances to support the longterm social and economic wellbeing of a confident, outward-facing Galway, alongside a respect for the quality of environment that will support such wellbeing.
4. Proud: supportive of the special identity and heritage of Galway as an international, Atlantic-facing, bilingual Irish city with deep roots in the Gaeltacht and many facets of Irish culture. These four Principles inform and run through all twelve thematic Propositions in Part B of the Galway Charter.

Proposition 8 An Inclusive, Social City

We believe Greater Galway's future depends on the skills, culture and co-operation of its people, whatever their background, age, ability or ethnicity. We propose building future social cohesion from an appreciation of the place, its history and including all people in the discussions about shaping the future.

We are a community that gets involved in the betterment of our area and Galway City, for all its Citizens into the future. Thank You