



SAINT MICHAEL'S COLLEGE

FOUNDED 1904

Department of Biology

29 January, 2023
To: Planning Authority
Áras an Chontae
Mullingar
Co. Westmeath
Re: Planning Application No – 22577; Application by Marina Quarter Limited

Development Description – 5 year permission for development at a site of total c.10.87 ha on lands in Cornamaddy, Athlone, Co. Westmeath

To Whom it May Concern,

I wish to object to Planning Application No – 22577 in Cornamaddy, Athlone.

We are currently experiencing a global biological diversity crisis. And although there's a strong tendency to view this problem as global, and therefore not for us to worry about, the crisis is operationalized one location at a time, one animal, plant, or fungus at a time, one badger and one Planning Authority decision at a time. Like other global problems, the solutions are local.

I currently manage a habitat restoration in the United States along with adjacent habitat that has been in a more natural state for decades. Restoration is a slow process, and when we measure biological diversity in the restoration site, it pales by comparison to the natural site. In this planning process, you have the opportunity to protect a site with an established badger population which would certainly suggest that conditions are right for a wide range of protected wildlife. This intact site will certainly already host far more biodiversity than a newly created mitigation site will in any meaningful time frame.

This begs the question: what biological surveying has been completed on site? I'm aware only of bat and badger surveys. Have we checked for all Irish red-listed species? And what consideration is being given to the results? It is noteworthy that Flynn/Furey Environmental Consultants' report dated November 2022 recommended trail camera use to document badger activity. What was the outcome of the recommended trail camera survey? I placed cameras at a sett in Glasson last year; it only took a single night to document 2 badgers using the site. Our badgers are worth at very least that small effort.

I would argue that the badgers are the tip of the iceberg for the larger pattern of on-site diversity. I grew up in Assumption Road; we didn't have badgers in the back garden so a good friend and I regularly went out to Coosan overnight to see them. We rarely saw them but we saw kingfishers, foxes, rabbits, once found a pine marten skull.....none of these animals were evident in Assumption Road.

And the activity kept a couple of teenagers out of trouble. If the people of Athlone still want to see badgers and other animals, they can currently go to Cornamaddy. Let's not deprive them of the opportunity.


In this case, the interests of developers must be weighed against the broader needs of Athlone people and against our obligation to preserve biological diversity for our grandchildren. I would argue that the best thing for Marina Quarter Limited is not the best thing for Athlone or Westmeath. We must value the broader needs over that of a corporation. And there are valid alternatives to approving badger removal.

It would be far better to develop residential properties closer to the center of Athlone thus reducing commuting and therefore carbon emissions. When I walked the town in May I noticed many vacant and derelict properties in Athlone, particularly on the west side of town. It would better serve the needs of Athlone people to inventory blighted properties with an eye to developing higher-density housing in existing urban footprints than to raze biologically rich habitat.

Although planning applications come in one site at a time, I have faith in a review process managed by a committee with eyes on the larger picture. I have faith in your courage to protect a biologically rich site and to prioritize innovative urban planning over the interests of a single developer. But if you fail to do so, you will have made your local contribution to the global biodiversity crisis; I know you can do better.

So please, reject this application, change the zoning of the site to preserve some open space and remaining rural character of the area. At very least insist on a complete biological survey and the recommended trail camera survey.

Sincerely yours,



Declan McCabe PhD
Professor of Biology

For what it's worth, I grew up in Athlone, went to the then RTC; off for a biology degree in Philadelphia; MS Ecology & Evolution in Pittsburgh; PhD Ecology in Vermont and have taught/lectured/researched as a biology professor since 2000. My specialty is biological diversity.