

An Bord Pleanála

Planning Appeal

Name	Peter Christopher O'Clery
Address	PO Box 213 Hall ACT 2618 Australia (50 Wallaroo Road Hall ACT 2618 Australia)
Agent	Ann Shouldice
Address of Agent	Knocklyon Castle, Ballycullen Road, Templeogue, Dublin 16
Development	Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre
Location	Hellfire Club/Montpelier Hill/Massey's Wood
Planning Authority	South Dublin County Council
Reference Number	JA0040

Basis of Appeal

Concern that, if developed, the proposed Centre would fall below visitor/tourism expectations and have needlessly and irrevocably changed the environmental character of the area to the detriment of alternative environmental management options.

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TIME 1pm BY hand
21 SEP 2017
LTR DATED _____ FROM AP
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My interest

I was brought up near Tallaght and, as a child, could sometimes see the Hellfire Club bathed in moonlight from my bedroom window. The story was always intriguing and the area of Massey's Wood delightful, but the 'presence' of the structure up-close was always extremely disappointing.

Returning to holiday in Ireland annually for many years, I have followed the recent debate on the proposed 'Flagship' Dublin Mountains Visitor Centre (DMVC) development in the area. Knowing the area and, more particularly, the international tourism industry, I have some concerns about the appropriateness and sustainability of the project from a tourism perspective.

Issues

Based on previous experience my concerns include –

- The lack of a physical 'wow' factor to support the Hellfire Club story. It is not an 'iconic' structure and the proposed DMVC really does not seem to uplift an assortment of experiences into "Flagship" status. I would tend to use the term the consultants used to describe proposals for Orleagh House - 'underwhelming'.

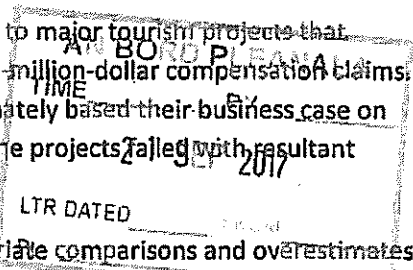
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- The major hill-tourism focus outside Dublin is more towards the Wicklow Mountains (as confirmed in the Orleagh House Report). Given the road access limitations from the planned DMVC south into Wicklow, it might be more appropriate to think in terms of a more accessible location further south closer to the main traffic route towards Wicklow.
- A concern that what is planned does not have significant capacity to attract international visitors in any reasonable numbers. Having read hundreds of tourism proposals over the years and been amazed at how positive consultants can be with very marginal figures, I am impressed at the extent to which the Business Plan warns of the financial risks of this project, even though it is fully funded from the public purse. There is clearly a severe warning here.
- If the project goes ahead, it will see a permanent reconstruction of the area which, should it fail, will be incapable of being 'undone' to restore the environment.

Concerns with the DMVC Business Plan

I spent many years advising on major tourism projects, attractions, visitor centres, redevelopment proposals and reviewing plans and strategies for both large and small tourism projects.

I have also been called as an expert witness in legal proceedings relating to major tourism projects that failed to achieve their visitor targets and consequently gave rise to multi-million-dollar compensation claims. In most cases, the well-connected and enthusiastic proponents unfortunately based their business case on over-optimistic assessments (and/or failed to see some negatives) and the projects failed with resultant losses to private and public investment.



In one case, the underlying visitor assumptions were based on inappropriate comparisons and overestimates of the conversion of existing regional visitors into customers. This major infrastructure project then failed and the developers attempted to attribute blame to a 3rd party. In the course of the case it became clear there were additional reasons adversely affecting the property, including the fact that its primary view was frequently obscured by coastal fog and sea mist. A factor not mentioned in its business case.

I have been unable to find any reference in the DMVC project plan indicating the extent that the primary view of Dublin and Dublin Bay (mentioned as important considerations for the DMVC in the Orleagh Report) will be obscured due to low cloud. I note that Met.ie indicates that wet days vary from 150 to 225 days per year from east to west coast. Weatherbase.com gives the average number of wet days (potential view obscurity) at 191 days per year in Dublin. This has to be a concern.

The failure of the project above also meant that an area of outstanding scenic beauty was forever marred by a large building no longer serving its intended purpose. A similar event could occur here.

In the second case, a major industrial accident at a new attraction caused substantial insurance claims, parts of which were based on trading losses due to failure to meet visitor projections. Numbers of visitors had indeed fallen sharply just after the accident and it looked pretty open-and-shut. However, research across newly opened visitor icons and attractions showed an interesting phenomenon. The curve for new major attractions is not upwards year on year as described in the DMVC Business Plan.

As a consequence of high initial marketing generating tourist and local interest, visitor numbers tend to be higher in year one than year two and then take time to recover. Locals tend to visit once and then only when they are showing a new visitor around. Hence, I believe there is reason to be even more concerned than the consultants about the year-on-year visitor growth numbers. As they say, (p29), *The estimated 100,000 existing users of local amenity are critical to the success of the DMVC – they represent a potential and immediate customer base of 40,000.*

It is of note here, also, that while there are no universally accepted benchmarks, standards or performance indicators for visitor centres, Australian experience is that the rate at which visitors to a region attend a Visitor Centre ranges from single digit percentages to a maximum of 27%. A similar pattern in Ireland would not bode well for DMVC.

While the Business Plan identified in its mission statement and objectives the key aims of development of tourism as a source of increased economic activity and job creation in South Dublin. The Business Plan contains scant data on what outcomes are anticipated for the wider tourism industry, as a key stakeholder, should the development proceed.

There is a reference to DMVC Business Plan that the projected growth numbers over 5 years (125,000) is on a par with Airfield Estate in Dundrum, while interesting, Airfield is a very different visitor offering. Examples of the experience of other non-main street visitor centres may make the case more compelling.

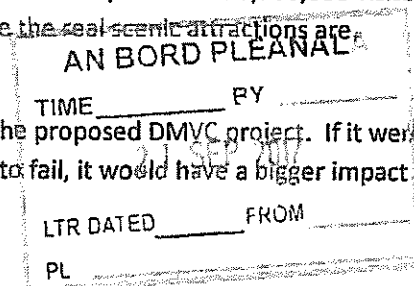
While the Business Plan does recognise the role of technology in tourism promotion, there is a concern that the development of more sophisticated applications will continue to erode the value of standalone visitor centres such as the proposed DMVC.

There is a trend in many new visitor centre proposals in Australia to look at incorporating other community functions which help to defray costs through shared services and resources. The non-main street location of DMVC precludes this as an option that could shore up the marginal financial position as identified in the Business Plan.

This is a costly proposal for some public land with a mixed collection of interesting but not iconic or unique attractions spanning from the megalithic to the modern. It is planned to be free, so it does not offer a commissionable product to tour companies. It has great views which are enclosed in cloud up to 190 days per year. It is one of the last remaining open areas in South Dublin unspoilt by modern urban encroachment. The projected visitor numbers in the context of total visitors to Dublin 125,000 out of 5,700,000 visitors per year to Dublin is pretty mild. The tours go further south to where the real scenic attractions are.

Conclusion

I have a real concern about the appropriateness and viability of the proposed DMVC project. If it were to proceed the nature of the area would forever change. If it were to fail, it would have a bigger impact than the original Hellfire Club ever did.



Peter O'Clery

CV overview

Peter O'Clery AM

Appointed a Member (AM) in the General Division of the Order of Australia for service to the Australian tourism industry, particularly through the establishment and development of research and education centres and to the community.

Former key tourism appointments

Chief Executive Tourism Council Australia (1984-1996)

Tourism Industry Program Leader, Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism (1997-2006)

Managing Director, Earthcheck Pty Ltd & Sustainable Tourism Holdings Pty Ltd (2001-2006)

Director/consultant, Sustainable Tourism Services Pty Ltd (Now Earthcheck Pty Ltd) (1993-2011).

www.earthcheck.org

Director, Australian Tourism Research Institute Ltd (1987-2008)

Director – Australasia, World Travel & Tourism Council (1999/2001)

Adjunct Professor, Tourism Management University of Canberra (appointed 1999)

Adjunct Associate Professor, Centre for Tourism & Hotel Management, Griffith University (appointed 1998)

Former Member of Great Barrier Reef Advisory Council and CSIRO Marine Sector Advisory Council

Education

BA and MA, Trinity College, Dublin University

Chartered Land Agency, College of Estate Management, UK

Professional (retired)

Fellow, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors

Associate Member, Australian Property Institute

Registered Valuer in NSW

