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Preliminary Budget Meeting 12th. December, 2011 Council Chamber

An Cathaoirleach, Councillor Eoin Holmes, presided.

Members Present:

Councillors Joseph Bonner, Sirena Campbell, Willie Carey, Shane Cassells, Francis Deane, Ann Dillon-Gallagher, John V Farrelly, Jimmy Fegan, Brian Fitzgerald, Joe Fox, Oliver Fox, Wayne Harding, Jim Holloway, Noel Leonard, Tracy McElhinney, Niamh McGowan, Jenny McHugh, Maria Murphy, Gerry O' Connor, Seamus O'Neill, Joe Reilly, Tommy Reilly, Catherine Yore.

Apologies: Councillors Eugene Cassidy, Jimmy Cudden, Suzanne Jamal, Nick Killian, Bryan Reilly.

Officials in Attendance:

County Manager: Tom Dowling

Directors of Service: Kevin Stewart, Fiona Lawless, Des Foley, Gerry Boyle (A)

Meetings Administrator Martin Rogers

Senior Executive Officers: Michael Griffin, Larry Whelan, Ger Murphy(A)

Finance Staff: Paul Timoney, Sheila Harkin, Michael Murtagh, Ger Soady.

Administrative Officer: Olive Falsey

The Cathaoirleach opened the meeting and before proceeding to the Budget presentation Councillor Fegan requested that former member of Meath County Council, Tom Dempsey, Trim, would be remembered as his funeral was taking place at 11.00a.m. in Trim.

Budget Presentation: County Manager's Address

The Cathaoirleach called on the County Manager, Tom Dowling, who addressed the meeting as follows:

"I attach for your consideration the Draft Annual Budget for Meath County Council for 2012. The Budget provides for expenditure of €101,489,701. The Local Government Fund for 2012, including retention of pension levy, is €23,285,000. This is a reduction of €2,268,557 on the Local Government Fund allocation for 2011. I do not propose any increase for the third year in succession in the Annual Rate on Valuation. I am therefore recommending that the rate remain at €69.6247 which is one of the lowest rates in the country.

In presenting this Budget I am mindful that once again it has been prepared against the backdrop of a very difficult national and world economy which has impacted significantly on County Meath and the people and businesses we serve. I am pleased however to confirm to the elected council that the Budget you agreed for 2011 will come in on target and will produce a small surplus to further reduce the significant revenue deficit this Council is carrying. I am very satisfied with this as it will be the 6th year in a row that we have been able to maintain a positive trend in our finances. This has not been achieved without significant stresses on the organisation with staffing number reduced from 867 in 2008 to 693 in February 2012. However, the efficiencies created in many areas of our activities during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger have stood us in good stead as we keep delivering the many services expected of this Council. There is no doubt that increased pressure on the public due to unemployment and slowdown in business has added to more forceful demands for support from the Council. In any budget we agree we must offer hope and support and recognise the strain so many people are under. We cannot however propose commitments that we cannot deliver on. I believe the public deserve better. That is why our budget is balanced and presented in a manner that retains the delivery of all



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the new services we provided over the last ten years in addition to the statutory services. These include active community support, library, art and cultural support, economic incentivisation, road safety, health and safety, heritage, tourism etc. All of these areas have to be supported and committed to if we are to have a complete community. This budget is positive for County Meath and represents an investment between Capital and Revenue expenditure of over €166m in County Meath. There is no reduction proposed or suggested in our local contribution to Roads Maintenance, Housing Maintenance or Water Services, Fire Services or Environmental Services. With the efficiencies created over the past few years there will, at the minimum, be at least as good a service provided as in 2011.

During 2011 the census confirmed that our population increased dramatically from 134,000 in 2003 to 184,000 in 2011. This is an increase of 50,000, the equivalent population of many cities and counties in Ireland. We have managed this increase with the lowest resources in Ireland and provided the services to facilitate it. I am also pleased that NUI Maynooth in its NIRSA report acknowledged and complemented the planning performance of County Meath.

In my Budget Statement for 2011, I reminded the Council that every budget presented to you is designed to show the people of Meath that we are prepared to lead and drive this county forward working in partnership with all sectors of the community to achieve the maximum economic, social, community, cultural and environmental, benefits for the county. In various presentations during the past year I reminded those present that Meath is the best positioned county in Ireland to benefit when the inevitable upturn in our nations economy happens. I am a firm believer that the work being done by the Council and our communities to enhance the appearance of our county is now more important than ever as we bid to impress business investors and tourists alike of the value of coming to County Meath. I am heartened by the continued enthusiasm of these groups and also by the positive approach taken by the business community to attract investment. We will continue our support.

It is important that we keep reminding ourselves what we have achieved and therefore what we have to offer.

- Excellent road network making County Meath the most accessible county in Ireland*
- Upgraded bus and rail transport accessibility*
- Top class waste disposal facilities*
- Good quality water and waste water*
- Our towns and villages have improved in appearance dramatically and are acknowledged as such*
- Excellent supply of top quality housing in desirable locations*
- A caring society with strong communities*
- An age, youth and family friendly county*
- Excellent swimming and leisure facilities – Trim, Navan and Kells*
- High grade communications for businesses and also electricity capacity in the county that is attractive to international investment*
- New businesses are opening in the county e.g. Coca Cola, Generali and all satisfied with their dealings with Meath County Council*
- Nationally recognised Road Safety Programme making County Meath the safest County in Ireland*
- Council funded Tourism, Arts and Heritage Officers – all of which have brought significant investment into the county*
- Strong social balance*
- Good quality social housing – all local authority houses have proper central heating and insulation*
- Energy efficient Public Lighting*
- A huge range of environmental initiatives*
- A top class Economic Development Programme*
- A nationally acknowledged Arts Centre and cultural support*
- New parks – Navan, Dunshaughlin, Balrath*

This is just a short summary of our achievements and the many advantages that Meath has to offer.



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It is vitally important that Meath gets more employment into the county. We must never cease influencing key decision makers of the need to prioritise job creation in this county which has a huge population living in Meath and working in Dublin, and certainly County Meath should not be disadvantaged in its bids to attract jobs. There is a need that County Meath be recognised by job creation agencies as a solution to assisting the Irish economy in creating jobs because of our envious location closer to Dublin Airport by time than Dublin City and for our excellent accessible well located land banks which key economic players believe is the best placed in Ireland. However, I believe that the inequity in grant assistance rates, the National Spatial Strategy and national agencies policies all make it extremely difficult to attract investment. These must be changed to facilitate rather than prevent job creating opportunities into this county and deliver what the investment customer wants.

I am pleased that a decision has been made to charge for water in the future and also that there will be a modest property charge. This is the only way there can be accountable and democratic local service delivery. Local authorities who are progressive need to be able to raise resources and with over 60,000 homes in County Meath this will be a welcome albeit onerous responsibility. It is essential when this property charge develops into a meaningful income resource that local authorities are allowed to retain the income it generates and have a major say in the extent of the charge.

The staff and management team of Meath County Council are hard working, extremely committed and believe in the county and the work of the Council. We want to deliver high quality, high value services. Next year will require a continuation of this work and commitment to achieve the results expected from this Budget. I have no doubt that once again they will deliver.

I would like to take this opportunity to compliment the hard working, dedicated and committed Management Team of Meath County Council, consisting of:

- *Brendan McGrath, Director of Services*
- *Des Foley, Director of Services*
- *Fiona Lawless, Head of Finance*
- *Kevin Stewart, Director of Services*
- *Tadhg McDonnell, Director of Services*

They and their staff are all committed to delivering the highest quality of services.

I would particularly like to thank Ms Fiona Lawless, Mr Paul Timoney, Mr Pat McHugh, Ms Sheila Harkin, Mr Michael Murtagh, Mr Ger Soady and all their staff for the tremendous work they have done not only in relation to preparation of this Budget but also for their dedication in putting Meath County Council finances in good order.

Finally, I would like to thank you Cathaoirleach, your predecessor and the members of this Council for your support in supporting and driving forward with quality policies the vision for this county”.

1. To receive the **Draft Capital Programme 2012-2014** (Section 135 LG Act 2001).

Paul Timoney, Financial Accountant, made a presentation on the Draft Capital Investment Programme 2012 – 2014 and this was noted by the Members.

2. To consider and discuss the Draft Budget for **Financial Year ending 31st December 2012**.

Fiona Lawless, Head of Finance made a presentation to the Members on the draft budget for the financial year ending 31st December 2012.

The main points put forward were:

- No proposed increase in rents and the adjustments will be made accordingly regarding assessment forms that have been returned.
- No proposed increase in commercial rates.



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- Following discussions with the Department the likely cut in the Local Government Fund could be up to 15% which would amount to the need for an €1.3m. cut to the budget.
- The National Recovery 4-Year Plan could have significant impacts on budgets going forward.
- 70% of budget is non-discretionary with payroll being the single biggest cost at 40%
- Debt collection is a significant challenge but no proposed increase in water services charges.
- Efforts continue to enhance and increase economic development measures and activities.

Following the presentations the Councillors were given an opportunity for questions and comments. The main issues raised and responded to included:

- Decrease of 8% in Local Government Fund – what is the situation with other local Authorities?
Allocation varies and Meath has received a good allocation re the LGF over the years.
- Roads Programme – value for money is important but there is a big cost to Irish companies.
*Received €3m. in 2011 from NTA and there is an indication that this allocation will remain for next year. There is an obligation on the Council to comply with procurement guidelines and all companies may tender for works.
Proposed roadworks' programme will be brought to Area Meetings in January.*
- €2.5m. for Navan Park – what will be delivered?
There are 68 acres for development of park facility in Navan that will benefit not only Navan but the whole county. Phase One works are proceeding – Significant grant aid has been approved for the project.
- Funding for the provision of Civic Amenity Site in Ashbourne.
There are three civic amenity sites in the County and a facility in Ashbourne would be of benefit in the area. However, grants would have to be made available to proceed with further sites.
- Decrease in budget for legal costs – what about pending cases?
Three court cases pending and Council will defend each one.
- Dog Pound
Tendering process has begun for dog and horse pound.
- Reference to increase in minimum rent – can this be explained?
Government decision to transfer rent supplement to Local Authorities and Local Authorities were advised to synchronise minimum rent with minimum rent supplement.
- Recent meeting re Navan projects –
There is a requirement to prepare a transportation strategy for Navan and this will be done in the shortest timeframe.
- How many void properties in the Council – can Council utilize NAMA properties?
There are 84 vacant properties with some in need of substantial repair.
- No reduction in commercial rates will make it even more difficult for businesses.
- Travellers' accommodation – where is new expenditure going to be made?
Three traveller halting sites in the County – refurbishment due at Windtown site.
- DPG's change in operation welcome. With regard to applications, will there be carry-over from previous year or will new applications have to be lodged.
Priority 1 and 2 cases have received grants. There is a small carry-over re DPG's to 2012 but no requirement for people to apply again. It is intended to issue notifications earlier in 2012.
- Major infrastructural projects like the Regional Hospital and Braemor Port need to be pushed forward.



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Meath Council Council proved to the independent committee that Navan is the best location for a new regional hospital and will continue to support this project. Support will also continue for other projects such as Braemor Port and the Navan Rail Line.

- Commitment to Alverno Heights and Boyne Valley tourism welcomed.
- Development of Science Park.
The south east Meath area appears to have potential for a science park but Government and regional policy does not support development in this area. Obstacles need to be identified and communicated to National Government.
- Slane ByPass
Not in current Government programme. The money provided is based on CPO being confirmed.
- Household charge
This will be collected in the same way as NPPR. It will be on the basis of self assessment with penalties for non payment.

It was agreed that further information and clarification would be provided to Councillors on other particular issues in advance of the Statutory Budget Meeting.

AOB

Councillor Leonard suggested that contact should be made with the Olympic Council Committee with regard to the visit of the 2012 Olympic Torch to Dublin and to explore the possibility if it coming to County Meath.

This concluded the business of the meeting.