

Minister officially opens Great Southern Trail

On Saturday, a new section of the Great Southern Trail in Abbeyfeale was officially launched by Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport Leo Varadkar.

The three-kilometre walking and cycling trail runs along the old Limerick to Tralee railway line to the Kerry county boundary at Kilmorna.

It represents an extension of the existing 38km of trail that runs to Abbeyfeale via Newcastle West and Rathkeale.

Earlier this month, walkers along the route met with opposition as they attempted to cross the county bounds into Kerry, during an event to mark the 50th anniversary of the last passenger train journey on the route.

A number of local landowners and objectors to the use of the railway line as a walking and cycling trail were present on that day.

Last Saturday, however, the Limerick section of the route received official government support.

"It's great to see the local community and various organisations coming together to develop this facility," Minister Varadkar said.

"Cycling and walking are increasingly popular, and an off-road trail like this is a fantastic facility."

IMPORTANT

He said developments like the Great Southern Trail are "important for the rapidly-growing activity tourism sector".

Chair of Limerick County Council, Jerome Scanlan, predicted that the development "will reap significant health, social and economic benefits for the wider community".

Figures show that there has been a 40% increase in overseas participants in hiking and hill walking to the Shannon region since 2006

and a 35% increase in tourism revenue from walking activities in the same period.

The existing sections of the Great Southern Trail are maintained by workers on a Rural Social Scheme administered by West Limerick Resources Ltd., a local development company. The 3km extension is maintained by the scheme with assistance from Limerick County Council.

The Great Southern Trail has been developed by Limerick County Council and the Great Southern Trail Group Ltd. with support from various public bodies including the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport, Fáilte Ireland, West Limerick Resources and CIE.



Benny McCarthy (Duagh), and Julie Byrne (Listowel), Jessica Hillard (Causeway) with Minister Leo Varadkar at the official opening of the Great Southern Trail last Saturday in Abbeyfeale.

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Minister backs railway trail campaign

Comments draw applause at opening of walkway

Backers of the proposed walking and cycling trail along the old railway line from Limerick to Kerry have now got Transport Minister Leo Varadkar on their side.

BY AIDAN O'CONNOR

The proposed route along the old railway line that runs from Abbeyfeale to Tralee is at the centre of a bitter dispute between landowners and promoters of the route known as the Great Southern Trail.

The dispute came to boiling point last month when gardaí had to intervene in a three-hour stand-off involving walkers and landowners on the Kerry-Limerick border at Kilmorna.

CIE claims it still owns the route, but local landowners are threatening to go to court

to claim squatters' rights.

On Saturday, Minister Varadkar officially opened the Limerick part of the route which runs from Abbeyfeale to the county bounds. He also cycled that part of the route but stopped at the Kerry-Limerick border.

However, the minister publicly backed the Great Southern Trail and said that he was in favour of extending the route into Kerry.

His support for the trail drew applause and cheers from the audience that comprised of very few landowners opposed to the development.

"That's why personally I'm very much behind the idea of extending the trail into Listowel and Kerry," he said.

DIRECT

"You know that's controversial, these things always are, but we can always get around these things as well and give people the assurances they need."

He went further, giving a strong indication that part of the €65m Cycling Network Fund could be made available for the trail.

The minister's backing is significant, given he's the minister in charge of CIE - the company claiming to own the rights to the land under dispute.

Liam O'Mahony of the Great Southern Trail group said this week that the minister's comments were "fairly direct and are putting it up to Kerry County Council now to apply for funding and

move the project ahead".

Ballybunion native, John Hannon, who has been hired as a consultant by landowners opposed to the trail, said that his group want to avoid confrontation at all costs.

"We're doing our own thing. Of course the minister backed the development. After all, he's the minister for tourism as well, and that's probably the hat he was wearing on Saturday," Mr Hannon said.

Landowners are writing to CIE this week, seeking a meeting to "clarify matters". But CIE have already stated that they own the line and are willing to have it developed all the way to Tralee for cyclists and walkers.

Landowners claim that legal issues need to be clarified and are willing to go to court to get their way.

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MEETING: Attending the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas public meeting at the IT Tralee on Monday, l-r: Bernard Collins (NEKD), John Mangan (Tralee), Bridget O'Connor (Camp), John Pierce (Causeway) and John Paul O'Connor (Cromane).

'Let's get off our backsides!'

It's time for rural communities to "get off our backsides" and save themselves, according to former Kerry football hero Pat Spillane.

was speaking at a public meeting on the issue at the ITT on Monday night.

the former GAA star

CEDEA: Speaking at the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas public meeting at the IT Tralee on Monday were l-r: Professor Cathal O'Donoghue (CEO CEDEA) and John Donworth (regional manager, Teagasc).

said.

