

## Great Southern Trail wins Special Jury Prize in European Greenways Association Award Scheme

Norma Prendiville

THE Great Southern Trail Group has won an European award for its work in redeveloping the old Rathkeale to Abbeyfeale railway line as a cycling and walking trail – a task which has taken 20 years.

The European Greenways Association conferred a Special Jury's Prize award on Great Southern Trail Ltd last week as part of their bi-ennial awards scheme. The judges citation said it was "in recognition of the efforts made for the last 20 years by the volunteer enthusiasts of the GST who, with their tireless endeavour, have succeeded in making reality the conversion of a disused railway line into a Greenway to be enjoyed by all."

Seven other "greenway" projects across Britain, France, Spain and Italy also received awards.

Two founder members of the GST group, Liam O'Mahony and Micheal MacDomhnaill accepted the award at a ceremony in Epinal in the Vosges region of France.

"We are really pleased," Mr O'Mahony told the Limerick Leader following the ceremony. The award was particularly significant, he added, because GST Ltd was the "only totally voluntary group there". "It is a recognition of our endeavours over the years," Mr O'Mahony continued. "And it puts us up there with some of the top greenways in Europe."

The European Greenways Association was founded in 1997 to promote the development of historical trails, disused roads and tracks, canal towpaths and old railway lines as non-motorised routes – for tourist and recreational purposes.

The president of European Greenways Association, Gilbert Perrin told the Limerick Leader: "We are very very happy to be able to give an award to GST. They do a wonderful job."

Mr Perrin, who walked 15 kilometres of the 28 kilometre trail last year, said he was very impressed by the



Setting out on a walk along the Great Southern Trail during Heritage Week with Minister for the Arts Jimmy Deenihan. Liam O'Mahony, chairman of the group, is standing to the right of the Minister.

members of the group and by their dedication. The group had succeeded in maintaining the old line in public ownership "which for us is part of public heritage", he continued.

He was also impressed by their success in preserving the integrity of the line as one route, rather than being split into sections. "That is for us a very important thing. And they do a really great job in this context."

Mr Perrin acknowledged also that the GST had experienced difficulties along the way – and mentioned in particular the problem private landowners wanting to use trail land for private use. He also mentioned difficulties with CIE to keeping the land in public ownership.

He described the Great Southern Trail itself as "very nice" and an important trail in terms of landscape

and railway heritage such as station houses and bridges.

Mr Perrin added that it would be very good if an Irish Greenways Association could be formed with a view to bringing together the different groups involved in developing greenways around Ireland. A federation of such groups, he said, would allow groups to help one another.

He added that he saw great potential for greenways along disused railway lines in Ireland.

This year's award ceremony, its fifth, was organised in conjunction with the Vosges council, the European Council, the European Commission and a number of other organisations. There were eight award winners in total from among twenty competitors in two categories.