

# Speech by Minister Noel Dempsey T.D., at West on Track Bi-Annual Conference, Claremorris, Co. Mayo

01 - 05 - 2009

[Back to Speeches](#)

Check against Delivery

1<sup>st</sup> May 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for inviting me here today, and for giving me the honour and the opportunity to deliver this keynote address at your conference.

Since its foundation in 2003, *West on Track* has gone from strength to strength. You have done this by drawing together the support of community and voluntary groups, local authorities and regional assemblies, academics, and development organisations, as well as a vast number of ordinary citizens.

You were inspired from the beginning by a vision of reopening the Western Rail Corridor, and a hope for what that corridor could do for the West of Ireland. At the time, back in 2003, the prospect of one day seeing trains travel the corridor again seemed to many to be remote. Many thought the battle could not be won, and was not worth fighting. Your attitude was different. You believed it could be done; you believed it should be done; and today, as we gather here, workers are busy along the corridor working to put it back into operation. This is in large part thanks to your efforts, and is a tribute to the vision, the energy and the determination which you have put into promoting the revival of the corridor over the past six years. I would like to congratulate you on your achievements to date, and wish you every success in the future.

Western Rail Corridor Phase 1

In 2007, only four years after your organisation was founded, work began on the first phase of this corridor, from Ennis to Athenry. This crucial section of the corridor means that there will once again be a rail link from Limerick to Galway which does not involve a trip through Dublin.

The work on Phase 1 has involved a great deal of clearance, as well as the upgrading of 36 miles of track and associated infrastructure. This work has progressed well, and we expect to see it finished over the summer, with services beginning around the end of the summer.

The new and enhanced services which will be available as a result of the opening of Phase 1 will, I have no doubt, have a tremendous positive impact on the economy and the life of the West of Ireland.

New stations at Sixmilebridge, Gort, Ardrahan and Craughwell will be opened to coincide with the commencement of services on the line. A further station, at Oranmore/Garraun, is due to open in 2010.

### ***Economic Context***

I don't need to tell anyone in this room that we are living in challenging economic times. We have seen in the past year the greatest crisis in global finance since 1929. As a small, open economy, we are perhaps more exposed than most to global trends. And we have suffered. Our exports have been affected, unemployment has grown, and years of dramatic economic growth have been followed by actual shrinkage in our economy. In 2008, our GNP fell by 3%. On current estimates, it will fall by as much as 8% in 2009.

This sudden and severe downturn has inevitably had a major impact on the State's finances. You may have seen the recently published annual report of the Revenue Commissioners for 2008, which showed that revenue from taxation in 2008 was €6.43 billion below that of 2007, and €8 billion below that expected at the time the 2008 budget was introduced.

These new circumstances inevitably present the Government with tough choices. We must, as a priority, stabilise our public finances. We must also promote competitiveness, stimulate confidence, and thereby promote investment and job creation.

We have made important steps towards these goals. In the recent budget, we have set out a multi-annual consolidation plan to stabilise the public finances. There are no magic solutions, of course. We have to increase revenue, and we have to control expenditure. We have set out plans for a permanent reduction in the public sector payroll, as well as other measures to reduce current spending.

### ***Capital Expenditure and Transport Investment***

In the area of capital expenditure, we have made it clear that we want to maintain investment insofar as practicable in the current circumstances. At the same time, we have to be realistic, and recognise that we cannot continue spending at the same level as in the boom years. We therefore have to prioritise. There is a silver lining in that there is a significant reduction in tender prices, which means that we can still aim to complete a very large part of the National Development Plan within the envisaged timeframe.

In pursuing our investment strategy, we are acutely conscious of the need to promote balanced development across the whole of Ireland. Twice in our history since our independence, we have experienced periods of dramatic economic growth – once in the 1960s, and more recently in the age of the Celtic Tiger. Both times, we have seen a

tendency for growth to gravitate towards the Greater Dublin Area and, to a lesser extent, some of the regional cities. This has meant that infrastructure in Dublin has been put under greater pressure, while many regions of the country have not benefited fully from periods of growth.

We have responded to this unevenness of development with a comprehensive plan, set out in the National Spatial Strategy, to promote balanced regional development. This thinking is embedded in Transport 21. We have set out priorities for investment both in Dublin and nationally. Our national objectives are:

to create a high quality, efficient national road and rail network consistent with the objectives of the National Spatial Strategy;

- to provide for a significant increase in public transport use in regional cities;
- to strengthen national, regional and local public transport services;
- and to enhance safety and security facilities at the regional airports.

As we now know, Transport 21 was drawn up towards the end of the boom. However, that does not change our overall goals. We still need to improve our infrastructure if we are to improve our competitiveness and promote a return to economic growth; and we still need to address the regional imbalance in our infrastructure and our economic development.

For the time being, we have to do this in the context of more constrained resources than we anticipated when Transport 21 was launched. To do this, we have to prioritise. Earlier this year, when it became clear that we would have to choose our greatest priorities, and when we looked at rail development, both my Department and Iarnród Éireann were agreed that completing Phase 1 of the Western Rail Corridor on time was the top priority for rail investment outside Dublin.

In September 2006 we in Government made a decision in principle to support funding for the development of Phase 2 of the Corridor between Athenry and Tuam. This approval is subject to completion by Iarnród Éireann of a fuller appraisal of this section. Iarnród Éireann is planning to conduct further studies in 2009 to ascertain more reliable costings for Phases 2 and 3. I understand that they will also be looking at usage of Phase 1 after its opening, and at its effect on overall patronage of public transport in the area. The timescales for the delivery of Phases 2 and 3 are under review in the light of the capital allocation available to the Department of Transport.

I, like you, am looking forward to seeing the impact of Phase 1 of the corridor when it opens. One of the top priorities of my Department is to encourage people to switch from private cars to public transport.

Earlier this year, I launched my Department's new strategy for sustainable transport, entitled *Smarter Travel – A Sustainable Transport Future*. This strategy sets out measures

so that by 2020 we can have thousands more people walking, cycling, using public transport and leaving their cars at home. We have set the goal of ensuring that by 2020 car share of total commutes in Ireland will drop from the current 65% to 45%. This is an ambitious target, and the Western Rail Corridor has an important role to achieve in fulfilling it. I know that I can count on your support and efforts in the implementation of complementary, sustainable (that is, non-car based) housing and other development in the region, in support of the investment which is being made in the rail corridor.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, I would like to thank you once again for inviting me to address you today. This is a big year for the West, as we look forward to the opening of the first Phase of the Western Rail Corridor, and you can be justly proud of the work you have put into making this happen. Thanks in large part to your work, not only is the West Awake; the West is, once again, very definitely on Track.

Thank you