



An artist's impression of the new €250 million Opera Centre

New Shopping Mecca for Limerick City centre

By ANNE SHERIDAN

THREE years since its inception, the developers of the €250m Opera Centre have finally been given the go-ahead from An Bord Pleanála but, they have been warned, conditions apply.

It promises 1,200 jobs in retail in a massive 250,000 square foot in the Patrick Street area of the city. An additional 500 construction jobs are also promised.

Despite support from local heritage bodies and city councillors, the project hit a detrimental snag when local architect Cáit Ní Cheallacháin and three others objected to the plans on the grounds that heritage will be lost if the development goes ahead.

Now, the design team of Regenerations Developments Ltd, are busy remodeling their ambitious plans to include the preservation of two Georgian buildings, which they had hoped to demolish.

Ms Ní Cheallacháin, who refused to accept €250,000 payoff to withdraw her objection, criticised the initial plans on the grounds that architectural heritage would be lost if the project went ahead.

Subsequently, two Georgian buildings at number 4 and 5 Rutland Street are to be conserved and repaired and possibly integrated into the overall development. The planning body has also requested further information on the "sky bridge" linking the retail space with a car park on Denmark Street.

Regeneration Developments must therefore submit revised

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drawings to the planning body incorporating all conditions before the development commences.

Mayor of Limerick Joe Leddin has expressed his delight that the shopping centre, which has been beset by a variety of setbacks, has now been given the green light.

"It is certainly the beginning in the next chapter of a remarkable transformation project involving the regeneration of our city into a truly modern urban and exciting

place to live," said Mayor Leddin.

Denis Leonard of Limerick Civic Trust said they're very pleased that the project has received a positive response. "I just hope the conditions aren't too onerous," he added.

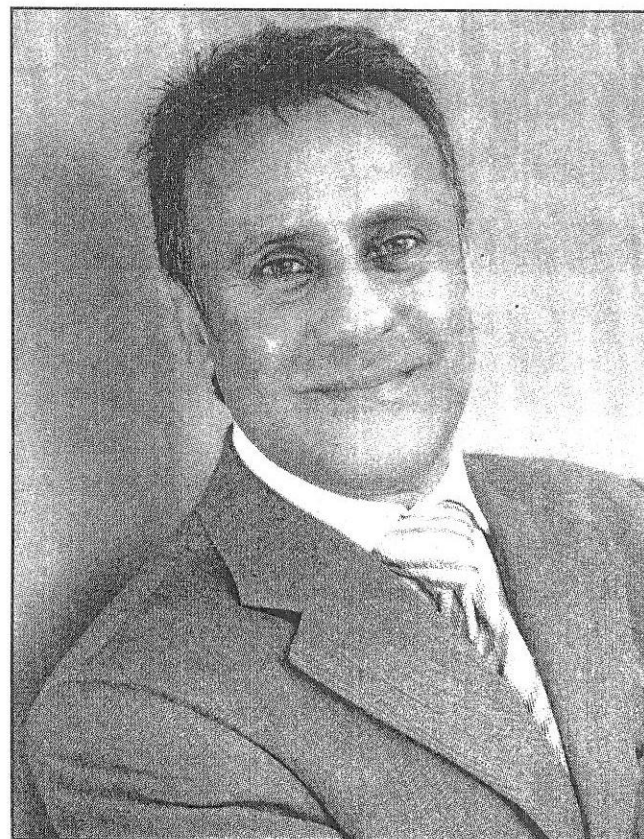
The project, which is the biggest development in the country at present, is set to bring 1,200 new jobs to the region and a reputed €300m boost to the entire region.

"This development will have a major impact not just for Limerick, but for the entire Mid West. In many ways it will bring about a renaissance for the city," said Suneil Sharma, of Regeneration Developments Ltd, the company in charge of the project.

The controversial move by the company not surprisingly provoked the ire of local politicians; leading some spectators to question the morals of Sharma, who is also Managing Director of Befab, an engineering group based in Belfast.

Speaking to the Limerick Leader on the morning of October 26 this year, when the decision from the planning body was due, Mr Sharma said he was wracked with nerves and had been up since 5.30am that morning as he couldn't sleep.

"I will be gutted if we don't hear today. It should be quite a simple decision. It's



Suneil Sharma: Opera Developer

the biggest thing Limerick is going to see in the foreseeable future. It will be bad for us as developers if it doesn't go ahead but it will be disastrous for Limerick and the Mid West," he said.

What the attempted payoff most clearly indicated is that Mr Sharma is desperate to get Limerick's "shopping mecca" off the ground, because he knows that Limerick may never see

anything as substantial in investment terms and as iconic in structure ever again.

Stretching from St Michael's Place, up Rutland St and into Patrick St, the building is to be named after the home of opera singer, Catherine Hayes.

"It will represent the cutting edge of design. It's something very special that we want the people of Limerick to be proud of. It really will surpass the traditional image of a shopping centre," enthused Mr Sharma.

Sharma also believes that the centre would be the city's "focus destination". "It's not simply a mall, it's also about lifestyle. We want to cater to all types of tastes and needs so that it will very much be a focus destination," he said.

"Really, it will act as a catalyst for sustained and increased future investment in Limerick and the surrounding areas. All our attention is on this. It has taken considerable effort and time to get this far. It has the strongest design team possible, with people from both North and South of the border," he concluded.

Sharma is also director of Varsity Estates Ltd, I.S. Investment Ltd, Rochester Property Developments Ltd, a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board and received an MBE last year.