



A bird's eye view of scenic Ballylanders on a summer's day

(LL)

Council plan for town seen as a confidence vote

By **NORMA PRENDIVILLE**

LIMERICK County Council has unveiled draft plans to build a new area office in Rathkeale and refurbish the Carnegie library building which was damaged by fire two years ago.

The resulting building will be at least double the size of the existing building and will have a landscaped parking area to the side and rear. Work is expected to begin early next year with a projected date of early 2007 for occupation.

"This is great news for Rathkeale. It is great to see a commitment to Rathkeale. At long last we haven't been forgotten," Noel White, chairman of Rathkeale community council, said this week.

The Carnegie library will be gutted and rebuilt with a new roof, new windows and a new outside

finish to link with the modern-style, limestone-clad area office alongside it. The Carnegie will also be redesigned internally to create a larger library with expanded reading spaces, a dedicated children's activity area and bathrooms.

Upstairs, the courtroom will be replaced with a large multi-purpose room for community use.

The area office will have a large public office where people can come in to transact their business, an open plan office as well as individual offices, storerooms and meeting rooms.

The draft plans, which were seen by the area's councillors this Monday, go on display in the Council's area office in Rathkeale this weekend, as well as in libraries in Askeaton, Foynes and Glin.

But further and more detailed design drawings still remain to be completed as part of the planning process. These will then go on display as part of the public consultation process and individuals

and/or organisations can make submissions. The final decision is expected to be made by the Council towards the end of the year when it will also have to make the funds available to carry out the work.

"This will mark a new beginning in the regeneration of Rathkeale," Mr White said in advance of seeing the plans.

The Rathkeale Town Forum has been reformed with new input, he said, and there was now "tremendous co-operation" between the Council and the various town bodies on particular projects.

"To me, this is a vote of confidence for the forum and for the town. But it is about time Rathkeale was treated with the respect it deserves and not as a second-class town," he said.

However, Deputy Dan Neville criticised the fact that the court services had now abandoned Rathkeale permanently.

Following the fire which damaged the courtroom and library in August 2003, District Court sittings were transferred to Newcastle West. Circuit

Court sittings were initially held in the local community centre but these have now also been transferred to Newcastle West.

Deputy Neville was told by the Court Service last month that it had "no plans to reopen a court venue in Rathkeale".

"I was assured in November last year that, prior to any decision being made to move from Rathkeale on a permanent basis, the Court Service would carry out a full consultation process with court users, including Gardai, local practitioners and public representatives. No such consultation has taken place," he said.

He intends to lobby the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform on the matter.

"He needs to take into account the special circumstances of the town and the fact that the court services have been in Rathkeale for over a century-and-a-half and have had an important place in the live the community," he said.

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