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Press release: Umeras Peatlands Park.

Ambitious plans for the rebirth of a bog.

Plans to develop Umeras bog, located between Monasterevin and Rathangan, into a tourist peatlands park creating a tranquil place to complement the Blueway and redevelopment of Ballykelly Mills as a tourist hub have been formulated by a local community group.

Local spokesperson, wildlife and rural development expert Eddie Smyth, approached the Irish Peatlands Conservation Council in July 2019 to begin a discussion on the future of the bog. With Bord na Mona decommissioning bogs and power stations there was an opportunity for communities to voice their views on how our bogs can fit into the development vision of local areas. He approached Bord Na Mona and the National Parks and Wildlife service and learned that their plans were to block the drains and return Umeras Bog to Nature. A local development group was formed to advance plans for what he describes as this unique area of heritage and beauty. The group, made up of locals, was inspired by the Lough Boora Discovery Park in Offaly which attracts 100,000 visitors annually and the location beside the Grand Canal which is a protected scenic route.

He said, "Kildare County Council is developing a 5 million-euro Blueway along the Grand Canal and Ballykelly Mills is under a 60 million-euro restoration as a heritage whiskey distillery. A peatland park is perfect to complete the tourist triangle with the transformation of a bog into a nature area along with exhibition centre, walking and cycling tracks, it's a dream scenario!". He said that *"the project can create a significant number of direct jobs in construction and maintenance, and indirect jobs in local towns with cafes, accommodation, bike-hire, transport, gift shops, kayak-hire, barge trips, etc."*

The not-for-profit group, Umeras Community Development, has submitted their proposal for the peatlands park to the Just Transition Fund, set up to assist communities and businesses in the midlands adjust to the closure of bogs and power stations. They have already produced an eight-page brochure outlining their plans with connections to the Kildare tourism hub including the Kildare Village Outlet, the National Stud, Curragh Racecourse, Newbridge Silverware all located off the nearby M7 motorway.

Bord na Mona has stated that they *"are willing to work with Umeras Community Development to explore this opportunity further, and in principle consider a peatland park to be an appropriate future use for the site"*. Kildare Fáilte and Kildare County Council Heritage and Biodiversity are fully supportive of this project and the Irish Peatland Conservation Council *"whole-heartedly support the restoration of Umeras Bog for the development of a Peatlands Park"*. The project is also being supported by the Monasterevin Sustainable Energy Community. Councillors in the Kildare-Newbridge Municipal District Area voted recently to unanimously support the project.

The design for the peatlands park has been inspired by the Lough Boora Discovery Park in Offaly with walking trails, wetlands, and a sculpture park. In addition, there would be an exhibition on the heritage of Bord na Mona and the machinery used on the bogs and the group strongly support continued local turf cutting and the chance for visitors to see this in action. The proposal for Umeras Bog is to develop a walking and cycling trail along the one kilometre of bog road to connect to the Blueway and to have a small visitor centre on the Quinnsboro Road, two kilometres from Ballykelly Mills. Umeras Bog has a small train station and three kilometres of track which could be used to bring tourists to a raised outlook pavilion with information on the unique nature of the forty acres of raised bog at the site. Visitors can also connect to the Blueway which is a protected scenic route and enjoy the protected view from Umeras Bridge and then enjoy barge trips and kayaking on the canal.

Umeras Community Development has launched a Facebook page (umeraspeatlands) and website (umeraspeatlandspark.ie) to get wider feedback on the proposal from communities, businesses and institutions. A gofundme page (umeraspeatlandspark) has been established to cofund a design study based on an application to Kildare Leader for 90% of the cost which has already raised over 3,000 euros.

Quotes to incorporate into the Press Release

This application has the support of the following organizations:

Bord na Mona – Stuart Conaty, Land and Property Manager “we are willing to work with Umeras Community Development to explore this opportunity further, and in principle we consider a peatland park to be an appropriate future use for the site.

Kildare Fáilte – Aine Mangan (CEO) “Kildare Fáilte is fully supportive of this Project and would like to wish Umeras Community Development Group every success with their application”.

Irish Peatland Conservation Council (IPCC) – Tristram Whyte, Conservation Policy & Fundraising Officer – “The IPCC whole-heartedly support the restoration of Umeras Bog for the development of a Peatland Park. The bog is situated to be a perfect linking amenity area and would be a great asset to both counties involved providing another substantial reason for international tourists to visit Ireland. There are a number of organisations, Governmental and Non- Governmental, Local and National that are available to input into this proposed project leaving one to see no reason why it would not succeed”.

Kildare County Council (KCC) – The Heritage and Biodiversity Officer, Bridget O’Loughlin, has stated that KCC strongly support this project as it provides Bord na Mona with an opportunity to balance the development of bogs in the county between biodiversity and heritage amenities.

Local councillors, senators and TDs from all political parties have offered their support.