

Passage West Town Council to investigate the setting up of a Community Council

Passage West is fortunate to have its own town council. Because Passage West was a thriving centre of industrialisation throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, the town sought its own local representation to government. So the Passage West Town Commissioners was formed through legislation in July 1920.

In 2001 that legislation was revised. Henceforth, all Urban District Councils and Town Commissioners were to be known as Town Councils. From the point of view of the former Town Commissioners, the breadth of their very limited budget and function stayed the same – the change was in name only.

But on 16th October 2012, the Minister for the Environment, Community & Local Government announced a major reorganisation of local government. From next year, he proposes to dissolve all 80 town councils throughout Ireland, thereby eliminating that tier of government closest to the people.

If Passage West Town Council had anything other than a nominal budget, it could effect real improvements within its jurisdictional area. In my time as an elected member, it has punched well above its weight for its available resources. In the last year alone, it has funded a paint incentive scheme for the town centre, funded a scheme to clean up Bonfire Night, assisted local sports clubs with major projects/events and presented community awards.

So much of what the Town Council does goes unseen. The road sign indicating Passage West on the N25 westbound is the result of several months of arguing with the National Roads Authority. The new seats on the popular railway line walk between Hop Island and Passage West were delivered by Cork County Council subsequent to ongoing negotiations with the Town Council. This year's Maritime Heritage Festival would have been less likely to happen without a Town Council. The inclusion of Passage West in the Ocean to City programme this year was as a result of work by the Town Council. Members donate monthly out of their personal expenses to the Tidy Towns. Some got together to organise clearance of the local graveyard. Regular liaison with the County Council helps to deliver the simple things that keep a town running: clipping back of overgrowth, emptying of overflowing litterbins, repair of non-functioning traffic lights, resurfacing of sections of roads and footpaths. The Town Council also functions as a lobbying body for the bigger issues such as dereliction and improved amenities whilst making a vision for the area heard through comprehensive submissions to local and national policy.

It is easy to criticise, and there is no doubt but that there is much room for improvement. But for the last 93 years, the Town Council has provided a focus for the town and a conduit by which the infrastructural and other needs of the town are communicated to the various responsible authorities. This will be lost in May 2014 when the proposed reorganisation of local government is initiated. This is a tragic loss for Passage West/Monkstown and for any other town in a similar situation.

In June, I proposed that Passage West Town Council should investigate the setting up of a community council with a view to replacing that cohesive core without which no town can advance. There are over 300 community councils in towns of varying sizes all around the country. Many of these are affiliated to Muintir na Tire, the national voluntary organisation promoting community development. Muintir na Tire has arranged to talk with the Town Council at a public meeting in Passage West Town Hall on Thursday, 26th September at 8pm to discuss the procedures involved in establishing and running a community council.

So whether you are from Passage West, Monkstown, Carrigaline or further afield, if you are interested in establishing a community council in your area, this is a meeting to which you are invited. The experience of other towns is that a community council can bring a strength and focus from which all communities can benefit.