

Legislation on conflicts of interest 'key to city planning'

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NEW PLANNING laws introducing an “evidence-based” approach to development need to be followed by “immediate and unambiguous” legislation dealing with conflicts of interest, according to the authors of a new study on Dublin’s future.

Papers from the four-year research project led by UCD, in collaboration with NUI Maynooth and Trinity College and funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, were published yesterday in a special edition of the *Journal of Irish Urban Studies*.

Referring to the “flawed” planning process that produced urban sprawl, lead author Dr Brendan Williams of UCD said the absence of hard evidence was one of the main reasons for so many poor development decisions.

“Given the central role which development financing has played in the current banking and financial crisis, it is astonishing to reflect on the absence of information and evidence on urban development – trends, prices and patterns,” he told *The Irish Times*.

His paper, jointly written with Cormac Walsh and Ian Boyle of UCD, says existing arrangements involving the sharing of administrative and executive powers over several layers of central and local government were often characterised by conflicting interests.

It blames “sudden changes in political priorities” for the fact that an earlier proposal that the planned directly elected Dublin mayor would chair a Dublin Transport Authority had been nullified by the decision to establish the National Transport Authority.

The paper points out that Dublin remains the main focus for inward investment in Ireland, in competition with other medium-sized European cities such as Amsterdam, and it still requires “considerable improved development and management”. After a decade or more of “excessive sprawl” facilitated by new roads, with a commuter belt extending up to 100km from the city, it says the consolidation of existing urban areas with development along principal transportation corridors “is now commencing”. It forecasts a “significant uplift” in the Dublin-Belfast corridor, aided by the M1 motorway and rail services. “If political stability is maintained, the benefits of linking more closely the two largest population centres on the island will increasingly become evident.”

Residential and commercial development, employment and investment trends “are all now regional rather than local issues” for Dublin, it says. “There is a necessity to manage such growth in a sustainable manner in the regional and national interest.”

Another paper by Michael Brennan, Tamara Hochstrasser and Harutyun Shahumyan suggests the recession provides “an opportunity to implement a “more rigorous planning policy” at national, regional and local levels so they follow “the same agenda”.

Despite the economic downturn, it is projected that the population of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) will continue to increase, “potentially exacerbating the negative consequences of urban expansion” – with coastal regions “subject to particularly high growth”.

Using scenarios developed on the Moland computer model, the authors forecast “intense” development near Rush, Balbriggan, Malahide, Portmarnock, Bray, Greystones and Wicklow – despite “records of flooding in all the areas over variety of timescales”.

“As extreme weather events are predicted to increase . . . care must be taken to ensure that, if development does occur, it incorporates effective drainage systems such as protected buffers along river banks, artificial wetlands for water retention and porous pavement materials.”

The authors also note the Government has been found wanting in the area of protected natural habitats, and that “any increase in disturbance could be expected to incur additional censure from the EU, which Ireland can ill afford at present”.

*The volume, edited by Prof John Sweeney and Dr Ronan Foley of NUI Maynooth’s Department of Geography, is available at www.uep.ie

SPRINT TO THE SUBURBS: RUSH TO ATTRACT DEVELOPMENTS

ONE OF the main factors accounting for the “dramatic surge” in office and retail developments in Dublin’s suburbs over the past 20 years was that local authorities in these areas were “eager” to attract such schemes “to generate commercial rates”.

In a paper published today in the *Journal of Irish Urban Studies*, Dr Andrew MacLaran, Dr Brendan Williams and Katia Attuyer said Dublin had witnessed “the most intensive office development boom in the city’s history” since 1990.

The suburbs “now account for a significant share of Dublin’s office space and office employment”, with a large amount of car commuting to these new locations, “which causes serious congestion problems as they tend to be poorly served by public transport”.

“Indeed, access by car to ‘edge city’ developments such as Citywest or Leopardstown was frequently quicker from place such as Carlow or Arklow than from congestion- clogged inner Dublin or from inner suburban areas such as Drumcondra, Harold’s Cross or Ranelagh.”

Planning policies drew office development to suburban locations following the reorganisation of local government in 1994 that resulted in a “fragmented administrative structure” of Dublin City Council and Fingal, South Dublin and Dú Laoghaire-Rathdown county councils.

“Suburban local authorities, deprived of income following the abolition of residential rates in the late 1970s and a central-exchequer subvention which failed to keep pace with inflation, were eager to attract office and retail developments to generate commercial rates.

“Furthermore, in the central area of Dublin, conservation became more strictly enforced, reducing the number of suitable sites available for office development”, the paper says. There was also growing competition for available inner city sites from hotels and apartments.

“These restrictions encouraged the increasing suburbanisation of office development during the boom years . . . The cumulative effect of these factors was a profound change in the geography of office development in the Dublin area and, consequently, of office employment.”

Although there had been a “pause” in suburban office development due to recession- induced high vacancy rates, the authors say the shift in the spatial pattern of employment in Dublin since 1990 “will have a significant influence on the

long-term development of the region”.

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