

A Ball of Smoke Stadium Debate

Controlling the message is a key component to any well-resourced strategy or plan devised by a local authority, regional agency or a sporting organisation such as the County Board of Waterford GAA. But in truth, attempting to control the message is probably the best any organisation can hope for. Why? Because once a press release lands in a media body's inbox, how an individual newspaper, radio station or website processes such information rests on their respective whims.

Whether the glass is rendered half-full or half-empty is at an editor's behest, and such decision making can, at times, greatly influence public sentiment.

Take the Walsh Park redevelopment, for example, and how the story was re-ignited by Dermot Crowe's Sunday Independent report before generating a week of air-time on WLR's 'Deise AM' programme.



Walsh Park will be redeveloped. The time has for that penny to drop passed months ago.

On Friday morning, November 9th, by which time we were four days into a stadium redevelopment debate which hadn't involved anyone directly engaged in the project, the GAA's Munster Council broke their silence on the matter. Now perhaps that's not how officialdom viewed it by the time Munster GAA Kieran Leddy spoke to Eamon Keane regarding Walsh Park but, to these listening ears, Mr Leddy's intervention, while utterly relevant, felt unnecessarily tardy. Between them, the Waterford County Board and Munster Council could have stopped this story in its tracks first thing on Monday morning, November 5th. It shouldn't have taken the guts of another week, and a meeting of 79 club delegates at Lawlor's Hotel to re-affirm that the Walsh Park plan is the project of first resort, subject to tackling both outstanding planning objections, of course.

"The aim of the GAA, in Waterford, Munster and Croke Park is to provide a venue in Waterford for the playing of Gaelic Games that has modern facilities for spectators and players but one that is financially viable, and that's the key phrase here: it has to be financially viable," Kieran Leddy told Eamon Keane.

Mr Leddy re-iterated that the feasibility study report into potential GAA stadium choices in Waterford (which he acknowledged was “well put together”) noted that a 16,500 capacity development at Carriganore would cost €16 million – minus the site cost, building inflation, etc. And he contends that overall cost would ultimately be “north of €20 million”. The notion of a free site being offered by WIT, as had been reported by The Sunday Independent, which was rejected in a statement issued by WIT (and re-iterated by Kieran Leddy), was, to anyone living in the real world, never likely to materialise. And that so much was made of an offer which had never been made, as stressed by WIT itself, was unfortunate and served to distort a realistic stadium debate. In fact, it did precious little to enhance the real time narrative: that the long-term primary venue of Waterford GAA will be Walsh Park.

Private meetings, such as the meeting which jump-started this debate was meant to remain, are not acts of subterfuge: in general, they are well-intentioned gatherings designed to examine hypothetical projects. I’ve been at a few of them myself and left my notebook behind me. Over the past decade or so, the Waterford County Board has generally taken a reactionary approach to dealing with headlines that it hasn’t always looked kindly upon. This is an area I have some experience in, given my own opinion on Walsh Park over the years, during which I’ve highlighted the absence of a light bulb, let alone Wi-Fi access, in the ground’s press box.

Differing perspectives have been offered to me by Board members, not generally for the purpose of generating further publicity from either this paper or the Board’s perspective, but we treat each other like grown-ups and that’s manifested itself in sustained, mutual goodwill.

Such goodwill is shared throughout Ireland’s regional print media when one considers the weekly output of Gaelic Games coverage across all titles, reflecting the significance of Hurling, Football and Camogie throughout our parishes. In fact, there is no other sporting organisation or national body which consistently receives such fulsome coverage in the regional press as that afforded to the GAA on a weekly basis. Given that this coverage has been resolutely maintained without the imperative of attached advertising (and despite strained in-house resources), local newspapers have done the resource-rich Croke Park a huge service with little financial recognition in return. I for one have felt there have been times when the coverage devoted to Gaelic Games is taken for granted both at county and national level: take it from a member of a club of reporters who’ve barely had a free Sunday evening in recent years due to deadline changes.

Given that level of goodwill, the County Board ought to have pounced on that ‘Sindo’ story and cut it off like a centre-back tracking an advancing forward chasing a deep ball. A press release, including contact details for a follow-up interview, ought to have been waiting in editor’s inboxes come November 5th.

Such a strategy would not have napalmed all of the online guff that followed, but it would surely have altered the on-air offerings about Walsh Park, Fraher Field and Carriganore. Instead, a week-long radio debate regarding a private meeting about a feasibility study for a theoretical stadium for which there was no budget then, there is no budget now and is unlikely to be ever budgeted for, ensued. And at the end of it all, what had changed? Absolutely nothing.

Rather than highlighting the poorly informed perspectives of incensed radio programme text messengers and hyperbolic online critics, it’s high time that cold, hard fact, and the efforts of well intended County Board officials, took centre stage.