

# Apple's data centre remains stuck in the mud around the fields of Athenry



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The tech giant's €850m investment, the biggest ever in the west, is imperilled by planning objections

**S**ara Walls runs the Gúna Geal ladies' clothes shop in Athenry, Co Galway. It opened in 2009, just as the economy was starting to bend like a reed in the fiscal winds then buffeting the State.

"It has been hard. I'm still paying off my debts. The recession was horrendous for the town and we're only just starting to creep out of it," she says. "We need a boost and Apple could give it to us."

A few doors down from Gúna Geal, Joanne Melia runs the Fields of Athenry gift shop, selling jewellery and trinkets. It's hard to cross the threshold without humming about Trevelyan's corn or how the young might see the morn.

"I want progress in this town, for my four-year-old daughter as much as anyone else," says Melia. Down the back of her shop, a tiny cafe seems to double as a local drop-in centre. There is gossip on the menu, as well as the cappuccinos. The hottest topic is Apple's proposed data centre in Athenry, and its planning woes.

"A company as prestigious as Apple in our little town?" says Melia. "Apple is good to the places it goes. Everyone was delighted when it was coming. We're all a little bit anxious now. I couldn't blame Apple if it walks away."

On the edge of town, Lester McNamara is wondering when he will get a day off. The proprietor of the 50-bedroom Raheen Woods Hotel was supposed to be off on Monday, but two local funeral groups were his priority.

It's good to be busy, though. Raheen Woods opened in the dying days of the last boom, and trade hasn't always been as brisk. McNamara senses more opportunities ahead.

"Senior Apple people told me they would never have chosen Athenry for their data centre unless there was a hotel in the town," he says. "It was just one of those boxes that had to be ticked."

As for the handful of mostly local objectors, some of whom this month have resorted to the courts to try and stop Apple's proposed €850 million invest-



ment there by signing research partnerships with the local university. But the proposed Athenry data centre remains mired in planning.

The project, which would create up to 300 jobs during construction and about 150 upon completion, finally received the green light from An Bórd Pleanála in August, 18 months after it was announced.

This month, three objectors – two local residents and a landowner based in Wicklow – received High Court permission to seek a full judicial review of the Apple decision. The objectors are due in the High Court on November 8th. On that day, as the United States chooses a new president, a judge will decide whether to let their application for a judicial review proceed to the next stage.

If a full review gets the go-ahead, it could delay the project by a further 18 months, testing Apple's patience. Viborg's server farm would be humming while Ireland still dawdled over planning issues. Apple has already expressed alarm to senior Irish officials.

Ciarán Cannon, Fine Gael TD for Galway East and former leader of the Progressive Democrats, shifts uncomfortably in his seat in the lobby of Raheen Woods as he contemplates the consequences for Athenry if the deal collapses.

"There is one message that we want to get out there," he says. "Athenry wants this project to happen. There is no question about that. Walk down the main street and I challenge you to find anybody who will say they are against it."

The proposed 500-acre Apple site is in a Coillte forest at Derrydonnell, a rural area three miles outside the town. It is bordered by Athenry Golf Club, Lisheenkyle school, and a smattering of small farms – the real Fields of Athenry.

The only evidence so far that it is the site of the west's biggest ever proposed investment is a pair of weather-beaten planning notices near the entrance. A few dog walkers roamed the pathways on Tuesday. Nobody else was around.

Paul Keane's family have lived nearby for generations. The technology entrepreneur played in the forest as a kid. More than a decade ago, an incinerator was mooted as a possibility for the site.

"In comparison, a data centre seemed an innocent thing to put there. The town had been dying. I could see the real benefits of bringing Apple to the area. But there was misunderstanding locally about what a data centre does."

Keane set up a Facebook group, Athenry for Apple, to support the project. Athenry has a population of about 4,000. The Facebook group has more than 1,400

**Video**  
See a video about Apple's Athenry planning woes at [irishtimes.com](http://irishtimes.com)

members. According to testimony given to An Bórd Pleanála by Apple, IDA Ireland first started showing it around potential sites in Ireland in March 2014. Led by senior Apple executive, Oscar Gonzalez, it visited 25 possible locations.

It quickly settled on the Derrydonnell site, due to its size, its location near motorways, the screening by trees and its proximity to US-Ireland submarine cables. It applied for planning permission in April 2015 to Galway County Council for one data hall, with the intention of constructing a further seven in coming years. There were close to 20 objections and observations. The most detailed,

adjacent to a butcher's in the town centre, and was supported by local retailers. Daly, along with Walls, was a prominent supporter, but An Bórd Pleanála shot the project down.

Sinéad Fitzpatrick, who lives near Lisheenkyle national school, was another Apple objector. A solicitor specialising in property law, she is a partner in a firm in Galway. Fitzpatrick organised a local group in relation to the Apple project, Concerned Residents of Lisheenkyle.

## Objection

Its 12-page objection, compiled by HRA Planning, includes a handwritten list with 19 signatures, although there is no declaration on that particular page making clear exactly what all 19 were signing up to. Fitzpatrick's group said Derrydonnell is the "wrong site" due to environmental factors.

Other objectors raised concerns

visited in January. Oral hearings were held in the Connacht Hotel in Galway over a week in late May. Apple was represented by senior counsel Rory Mulcahy. Several objectors, including Daly, made detailed submissions and all concerns were discussed.

Permission was granted by An Bórd Pleanála in August, and the Athenry for Apple Facebook page was swamped with congratulatory posts. In recent weeks, however, three people approached the High Court seeking permission for a judicial review on procedural grounds, a potential disaster for the project's supporters.

Daly and Fitzpatrick have joined forces, jointly represented by Fitzpatrick's legal firm, Kennedy Fitzgerald. There was no response from Fitzpatrick to a request for comment. In an email, Daly said: "My submissions . . . reflect my own personal opinions and analysis . . . And on that personal basis, I have always been available to discuss my submissions with any party interested in the matter."

He denied, however, that he had "ever performed, or offered to perform, any professional consulting services for any party in exchange for fees, remuneration, or any other compensation".

"I have never offered any services to Apple whatsoever at any time."

The third High Court objector came from left field. Brian McDonagh is one of three brothers who, in 2007, paid €22 million for land in Wicklow, funded by Ulster Bank. They applied for permission for "the world's largest data centre", using a company, Ecologic Data Centres.

A planning battle ensued that went all the way to the Supreme Court in 2013, where the McDonaghs defeated An Bórd Pleanála, which had refused permission. Some of the Apple objectors have pointed to the Wicklow site as a possible viable alternative. McDonagh does not appear on the list of original objectors in Athenry.

There is one objection recorded, however, from a Dr Yeok See Ooi, who gave an address in Ballymount, Dublin. Dr Ooi gave no reasons for the objection.

Companies office records show McDonagh has operated businesses from an address close to the one given by Dr Ooi. A trawl of High Court documents reveals Dr Ooi was, in fact, McDonagh's girlfriend. She is an ophthalmologist based in Wicklow, and appears to share his Delgany home.

A woman who answered the phone at McDonagh's Delgany address, which was on the market in 2004 for €5.5 million, said she would pass a message to him from *The Irish Times*. There has been no

■ A CGI of the Apple's planned data centre in Athenry, Co Galway which is now being challenged in the High Court

response to several further phone calls. All three Apple objectors are due in court in November. Daly and Fitzpatrick will be represented by her firm, while McDonagh is representing himself.

## Nervous

The local supporters of the investment in Athenry are praying there will be no judicial review, spawning further delays and possibly putting it at risk.

John Moylan, who is in charge of sales at local panels manufacturer SIP Energy, has attended open days and supply chain meetings at Raheen Woods organised by Apple. He hopes to pick up business from it.



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"It makes me nervous, this hiatus. Do you think a data-centre developer will wait around for a further 18 months?" he said.

Pádraig Lynch, a Galwayman who works in the data-centre sector and is involved in the Athenry for Apple group, believes it would "put Athenry on the map" for future investments.

Keane believes the process has proven that "the will of the few seems to be more important than the will of the majority . . . the majority have no voice".

Walls, meanwhile, is worried about the "tensions" it is stoking up in the town.

Cannon, a former planning officer, believes the future economic development of the area may be stunted if the Apple deal doesn't go ahead.

He raises a hand towards the fields across the road from Raheen Woods: "This is the heart of a strategic economic corridor, all the way down to Galway city. IDA owns 60 acres out there that it says are among its most strategically important sites in the country. Then these three objectors come along. . ."

The town awaits a decision.



One local resident is an avid astronomer, and worried that light from the data centre might affect his hobby

ment in Athenry, McNamara shrugs his shoulders.

"I respect their right to follow procedures," he says. "There are plenty of things I didn't want in my back yard but they're in my back yard. People just have to get on with it. Apple is an iconic name, and it'd be great for the town."

## Two data centres

In February 2015, Apple announced it was investing €1.7 billion in two European data centres, evenly split between Athenry and Viborg, in Denmark.

The news was greeted with joy in Athenry, until now famous only for a song. That one of the world's largest companies was planning the single biggest investment ever made west of the Shannon was music just as beautiful to the ears of local residents.

Things soon got a little out of tune, however.

The Danish centre is already half built and Apple is following up on its invest-



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raising concerns relating to issues such as the power usage and the environmental impact statement, came from local resident Allan Daly.

Daly, a Pennsylvania-born engineer, is married to a Galway woman heavily involved in the local arts scene. They are frequent visitors to local cafes, such as the Nook in the centre of town.

He was closely involved in a past planning battle in Athenry when a supermarket was proposed for Brady's Field

including flooding and the impact on bats, badgers and pedigree sheep. One local resident is an avid astronomer, and worried that light from the data centre might affect his hobby.

The council granted permission in September 2015, with 20 conditions covering issues such as access and environmental concerns. Eight objectors, including Fitzpatrick and Daly, appealed to An Bórd Pleanála.

The appeal board's site inspector

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