

GREEN PARTY MLA BRIAN WILSON SPEECH TO ASSEMBLY

MOTION: *That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to set up a public inquiry under Articles 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 in relation to the application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport, in order to properly test all the relevant economic and environmental arguments.*

In proposing this motion I should first like to clarify my own position. I am totally opposed to any extension to the runway at George best Belfast City Airport. However this is not the intention of the motion which is to call for the application to be referred to a public inquiry-as was the case in the recent John Lewis application.

The support for an inquiry is wide spread ranging from local councils including those most affected Belfast and North Down, to many thousands of residents, to the largest user of the airport FLYBE and Belfast international Airport. These concerns must be addressed in a transparent manner and this can only be done through a public inquiry.

This is not a straightforward planning application.

It will affect whole neighbourhoods and impact on the strategic significance to the development of the Northern Ireland economy. It raises important social, economic, strategic and environmental issues which cannot be examined under the normal planning process.

The case for a public inquiry under Section 31 is overwhelming

It is essential that all stakeholders have the opportunity to make their case. A public inquiry would give the people most affected by this airport particularly in Holywood and East Belfast the right to have their concerns and views heard

It would allow the independent scrutiny of the noise, health and environmental impacts of the proposed runway extension. In particular it would enable the inquiry to examine the impact of the changes made in the 2008 Planning Agreement and the introduction of larger Boeing 737s last year.

The Inquiry could also examine the economic benefits and disadvantages to the overall NI regional economy and evaluate the impact on Belfast **International Airport** and the possible displacement of passengers and flights threatening its long term viability and its ability to compete with Dublin airport.

Some observers see this issue as one of comparing the environmental impact on local residents against the economic benefits to the Northern Ireland economy.

This analysis underestimates the environmental impact and exaggerates the economic benefits (if any). In fact while there clearly are financial benefits to the company there is no evidence of benefits to economy as a whole. In fact the 2003 Aviation White paper suggested that any increase in airport capacity should take place at the International airport

Economic benefits

A number of economic benefits have been suggested such as an **increase in jobs**.

Although some new jobs will be created in the construction of the runway in the long term few new jobs will be created. The proposed increase in flights is less than 10% and this is not likely to create many extra jobs in servicing the airport. New jobs created are likely to result from a displacement of jobs from the International airport.

- Increase tourism
Most tourists expect to travel 10 to 20 miles when arriving at a foreign destination. Indeed Ryan Air passengers would expect to travel 50 miles. The slightly shorter distance from Belfast City is not likely to influence a tourist who wants to visit Northern Ireland.
- Increased business traffic – The City Airport already provides an excellent service to most major UK cities. Unfortunately there is no European City which could justify a regular flight to service business alone and in the past year a number of flights to European cities have been withdrawn. In fact the present business user is more likely to be discouraged by having to queue behind 300 holiday makers bound for Tenerife or Malaga. I suspect one reason why Flybe are opposed the extension is that it would disrupt their regular business customers to British cities and change the nature of the airport.

The Airport has waged a propaganda campaign against a public enquiry stressing the economic advantages to the local economy. It even commissioned polls to show how much the public supported the Airport plans. However the poll

- A) Asked the wrong and leading questions
- B) Ignored the main issues such as the environmental impact.

- C) Polled the wrong people. Businesses in Belfast City Centre were polled but those in the areas most affected Holywood, Sydenham and East Belfast were excluded
- D) Much of the research was carried out before the proposed extension became public knowledge. As a reflection of public opinion it has no credibility.

As an economist I see no significant economic benefit from the proposed extension.

On the other hand I do see a number of serious social and environmental problems.

The new Planning Agreement allows a significant increase in passenger numbers (1million) and an additional 3000 flights.

The arrival last year of the Ryanair 737-800s, caused an increase of 122% in the number of people significantly affected by noise. The impact of these changes on local residents should be assessed before any further increases should be considered. Despite assurances that flights would be directed over the Lough almost 90% still fly over residential areas.

The runway extension will lead to an increase in noise pollution. The reason for the extension is to allow the take-offs of fully loaded, fully fuelled large jets, which will use the full length of the extended runway, and being much heavier, will be much lower and louder.

A key statutory consultee the Eastern Health Board has voiced major reservations of an increased health risk but was not – consulted by Planning Service and There has been no health impact assessment, even though the application has been classified as major development.

Meanwhile tens of thousands of people are being forced to endure the unrelenting expansion of the airport which impacts the most on people, while less than 20 miles away exists an airport with plenty of spare capacity, no noise issues, no need for a curfew on operating hours, no cross-wind issues, no bird reserve issues, 2 runways, with no areas of dense population

One has to ask the question why the company is so opposed to a public enquiry. Why are they against an open public debate?

In the absence of any overall strategic examination of airport capacity we require a public enquiry to answer a number of questions.

- A) What are the benefits to the economy?
- B) How will the extension meet the European criteria for a City airport?
- C) Will any major structural improvements have to be carried out?
(e.g. widening Sydenham Bypass)

- D) What will be the impact on the Belfast International Airport?

- E) Will Belfast International Airport be denied the critical mass of passengers to compete effectively with Dublin Airport for International flights?

- F) What are the long term implications for the development of air travel in Northern Ireland?
- G) Will we see a further application to expand the number of flights at the City?