

THE IRISH TIMES

Landmark day for Curragh as €65 million plan outlined

Government, Turf Club and private investors join forces to fund the massive project

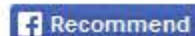


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The word 'momentous' was repeatedly used at the launch of the Curragh's €65 million redevelopment project and it was apt since rarely can nearly 200 years of history have blurred so publicly.

Ireland's best-known racecourse, famously 'The Home of the Classics,' has been owned by the Turf Club for almost two centuries and through a long-lease arrangement with the Department of Defence could easily look forward to at least another century in charge if it wanted.

But history aside, the concrete reality is that the Curragh has barely changed structurally in the 50 years since Bing Crosby welcomed home his 1965 Irish Derby winner Meadow Court.



Simon Coveney says HRI Bill to go before Dáil next week



€65 million Curragh racecourse redevelopment confirmed

At the turn of the Millennium the Aga Khan pointed out the place wasn't commensurate with Irish racing's place on the world stage, famously bought and donated a hotel for reputedly nearly 15 million quid in order to allow building work, only for the economy to tank.

The economy may be on the up again but Irish racing's integrity body is in no position to finance the major facelift everyone agrees the Curragh needs.

So in return for the €65 million investment it has agreed to a new racecourse management company where it will be merely a one-third shareholder.



Breeders' Cup success can confirm American Pharoah's place at top

Next year

The money comes jointly from the Government – through [Horse Racing Ireland](#) – and seven private investors. HRI is a third shareholder, so are the investors, and building work is set to commence towards the end of next year with a 2018 deadline.

Any Turf Club wistfulness at seeing control slip through their fingers was drowned in a giddily optimistic atmosphere at its exclusive racecourse rooms where the tone of the launch was resolutely forward-looking.

The project, which includes a new grandstand and new parade-rings, has to get planning permission before the end of the year but few missed the enthusiastic presence of Kildare County Council's chief executive among the throng.

Nevertheless, the Turf Club's chief executive Neville O'Byrne wasn't counting any chickens, describing a summer-2018 opening as an aspiration, to which Pádraig McManus, chairman of the new Curragh company, and the current Eir chairman, responded: "I've never been into aspiration: a date is a date. 2018 is the plan and that's what we intend to do."

If such business bullishness felt like the breath of a new era through the genteel old Turf Club rooms, the Minister for Agriculture [Simon Coveney](#) was keen to praise the 225-year-old body for its co-operation with a project which he predicted will be a "magnet" for both national and international racing fans.

Two bodies

Although he conceded that negotiations between the Turf Club and HRI had been challenging at times, with relations fraught between the two bodies for some time, he said the one thing everyone agreed on was the need for the Curragh to possess an infrastructure appropriate to its status as one of the world's great racecourses.

Notably absent from the launch were any of the crucial seven investors and no one showed any desire to lower the tone by enquiring of their representatives in Kildare as to how much is being contributed individually.

However the Minister did confirm though that further private investment is anticipated and he joked if anyone wanted to contribute he would buy them a cup of tea – "An expensive cup of tea!"

More notable in the long term could be the Government's stake in the new Curragh in return for State funding.

Minister Coveney said it wasn't for him to advise other sports but added that large-scale public funding at the Curragh demanded accountability.

"If we're going to spend a lot of public money then we want a businesslike structure in place to ensure we get full value for money," he commented. "I wouldn't like to be telling other sports how to do their business. Our job is to do what's right for the Curragh."

So even considering the first race at the Curragh was staged in 1727, it did feel like a landmark moment, one where concrete plans for the track, and who owns it, were outlined.

And if the place isn't going to be run exclusively by the Turf Club anymore, how many punters through the new gates are likely to care about what kind of club is at the helm in 2018?