

**BALLYMONEY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**Development Committee Meeting No 182 – 14<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

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## BALLYMONEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of Development Committee Meeting No 182 held in the Council Chamber, Riada House on Monday 14th May 2007 at 7.00 pm.

**IN THE CHAIR:** I Stevenson

**PRESENT:**

**Aldermen**  
 F Campbell  
 H Connolly  
 C Cousley (Deputy mayor)  
 J Simpson (Vice Chair)

**Councillors**  
 J Finlay (Mayor)  
 M McCamphill  
 P McGuigan  
 A Patterson  
 E Robinson

**APOLOGIES:**

**Councillors**  
 M Storey, MLA

**IN ATTENDANCE:**

Chief Executive  
 Committee Clerk  
 Mark Prentice, General Manager ]  
 Eric Cosgrove, Town Engineer ] Firmus Energy  
 Neil Holland, Sales and Marketing ]  
 [Item 2]

### 182.1 MINUTES OF MEETINGS NO. 181 – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2007

It was proposed by Alderman Connolly, seconded by Alderman Cousley and  
**AGREED:**

*that the minutes of Meeting No 181 – 11<sup>th</sup> April 2007, as circulated, be confirmed as a correct record.*

\* Councillor McCamphill arrived at 7.04pm.

### 182.2 NATURAL GAS

Representatives from Firmus Energy made a presentation to members on the gas pipeline project with particular regard to current works in Ballymoney (attached as Appendix A). During the presentation the General Manager advised members that their plans for Ballymoney Borough Council offices and the Leisure Centre would incur zero conversion costs (ie: all conversion costs to be paid by Firmus Energy). Contact details for Firmus Energy attached (Appendix B).

The Chair invited members' questions in relation to the presentation.

Councillor Finlay asked the General Manager if he could guarantee that the price of their gas would not rise unreasonably in the future? The General Manager replied stating that the existing 2 year capped tariff price for domestic customers is extended for another 12 months until 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009. Furthermore, a 10% reduction in the top tier of tariff for commercial customers is also capped until 1<sup>st</sup> January 2009.

Alderman Campbell advised that he was aware that there were no storage units for gas, such as in the case of oil, and queried if the gas pipe was indeed a direct feed? The General Manager confirmed Alderman Campbell's information that there were interconnectors under the sea to Great Britain where upon a daily estimation of how much gas is needed is made allowing real-time release.

\* **Councillor Robinson arrived at 7.23pm.**

Alderman Campbell also asked what Firmus Energy thought the life-span of gas would be? Their Sales and Marketing representative explained that they had acquired a 30year licence for gas, and in addition that they are finding natural gas all the time citing that there is more untapped gas than oil.

Alderman Simpson queried the proposed renewables efficiencies. The General Manager answered that there would be carbon savings and sustainability – that in doing the simple things to reduce ones carbon footprint you would make a 25% saving immediately by switching to natural gas.

\* **Councillor Patterson arrived at 7.30pm**

\* **Councillor McGuigan arrived at 7.35pm**

The Chair thanked the representatives for their presentation and confirmed that he had received no complaints from NIHE residents in the Glebeside who had gas installed by Firmus Energy. However, he suggested that there was an air of a cynical view that gas prices would rise. The General Manager replied that not all gas companies were the same and that the market here will actually be opened up to competition within 5/8years time, which is a different scenario than that of the Belfast area. Firmus Energy prices will always be competitive with oil with gas being the lowest priced fossil fuel in the last 20years.

\* **Firmus Energy representatives left the meeting at 7.40pm.**

### **182.3 VISIT TO BENBROOK**

Chief Executive tabled a paper on the recent visit to Benbrook. (Attached as Appendix C).

**This being all the business the meeting closed at 7.45pm.**

Appendix A – Presentation by Firmus Energy  
Appendix B – Contact details for Firmus Energy  
Appendix C – Report on Visit to Benbrook

# Appendix A

[Download the Firmus Energy Presentation here](#) Ballymoney council  
update - 14th May 07

# APPENDIX B





# APPENDIX C

Report to Development Committee, 14 May 2007

Visit to Benbrook, 2007

### Introduction

Council meeting CM 855 on 5 February 2007 agreed to send the mayor and chief executive to Benbrook, Texas. This followed a communication to the mayor from Benbrook stating that Benbrook city council had decided unilaterally to terminate the Friendship Agreement between Ballymoney and Benbrook. The purpose of the visit was to ascertain if the agreement could be salvaged. The Twinning Association also agreed to send its chairman to accompany the council delegates, as both the Twinning Association here and the Benbrook Sister Cities are keen to continue with the friendship link.

### Background

Ballymoney Borough Council began the search for a sister city in USA in the mid 1990s. In 1998 the then Mayor of Benbrook, Jerry Dunn, met a council group at the Miami Beach Sister Cities conference and invited Council to send a delegation to Benbrook the following year.

In 1999 a delegation visited two potential sister cities, Overland Park, Kansas and Benbrook, Texas. The visit was arranged to coincide with the Sister City conference in Little Rock, Arkansas. In Overland Park the delegation met Councillor Tim Owens, whose family came from Ballymoney and spent some time viewing that city. After the conference the Ballymoney party went on to Benbrook. During that visit they met the mayor and city manager, visited several council facilities, schools, the new library and explored Fort Worth.

A delegation from Benbrook visited Ballymoney borough in autumn of 1999 and it had been suggested that a further meeting with Benbrook representatives would take place at the sister city conference in 2000 in Denver, Colorado. However, council decided against sending representatives to that conference and when a letter was received from Benbrook expressing their interest in a friendship agreement with Ballymoney, council agreed to invite a delegation to Ballymoney in the autumn of 2000.

Council also consulted the recently established Twinning Association on its attitude to the establishment of this link with the USA, given that the association had been formed by council to develop the civic links and to involve the wider community. It is reported in the minutes of DC 102 on 14 August 2000 that “the Association has written advising of its full support for extending the twinning programme to include other areas where contact has already been established ... “. Due to events in Benbrook the visit of its delegation was deferred until April 2001 when a Benbrook group came to Ballymoney and signed the Friendship Agreement. A Ballymoney delegation visited Benbrook the following month and completed the signing process during that trip.

### Development of the Friendship Agreement

The work of developing the link has been led at this end by the Twinning Association and began with e-mail contacts between school children. It was hoped that this would create friendships leading to student exchanges but this development was delayed by the terrorist attacks on the USA in 2001. In 2005 the first party of Benbrook students came to Ballymoney and in 2006 the first group of young people from here went to the Benbrook. In that same year two community police officers visited Benbrook to see at first hand how they deal with community policing. It is hoped that some Benbrook police officers will visit Ballymoney in due course.

In June 2007 the second student visit from Benbrook will take place and a packed programme has been set up by the Twinning Association to give the visitors a memorable experience in Northern Ireland. The Mayor will host an event during the visit.

### Benbrook 2007

The official visit to Benbrook took place last month, from 16 – 21 April. The first official engagement on April 17 was a meeting with Mayor Dittrich, former Mayor Hebert who signed the agreement in 2001 and Council members Schull and Allison who both support the link. Former mayor Dunn, who is now chair of Benbrook sister cities association, was also present.

Mayor Dittrich stressed that the decision to withdraw from the agreement with Ballymoney Borough was no reflection on Ballymoney and had to do with local Benbrook politics. It was evident that the origins of the dispute within Benbrook council go back to the period before the agreement was signed, when Mayor Hebert defeated Mayor Dunn in the election of 2000. Many of those who supported Mayor Dunn are also supporters of sister cities and it appears that personal animosity has been transferred to projects and programmes associated with Mayor Dunn's time in office. The links with Bled, Slovenia and Ballymoney became casualties in 2006, when a majority of council was persuaded to vote against the two links.

The Ballymoney delegation explained its reasons for seeking twinning arrangements in France, USA and more locally and stressed the benefits they bring to the students who take part in exchanges and the wider benefits when communities experience other cultures and develop a greater understanding of the issues affecting people in other parts of the world. The decision taken by Benbrook does not just affect that area but has wider impact and the need for that to be considered was emphasised. Mayor Dittrich understood this point and was not happy with the decision but explained that he is bound to implement the wishes of his council.

The decision to sever the links was taken by a majority of four out of the seven members on the council and one of those four did not seek re-election in 2007. His place will be taken by a new council member Daniel Tully, who was returned unopposed.

On Thursday 19 April the delegation was invited to attend a lunchtime meeting of Benbrook Chamber of Commerce. Its president, Jennifer Schull, is the wife of council member Schull, who supports retention of the links. The Mayor was invited

to speak to the meeting and used the occasion to stress the value of international contacts and to encourage the chamber to give financial support to the Benbrook sister cities.

During the visit the delegation was shown local tourist attractions such as a log cabin village, Fort Worth zoo, an art fair in the Main Street in the centre of Fort Worth's commercial district and the Stockyards area where the cattle drives in the 1800s terminated with cattle being sold at market and shipped north on the railway.

The final official engagement was a dinner hosted by Mayor Finlay. This was an occasion to thank the families who had hosted the delegation members and who had provided entertainment and transport during the visit. All council members were invited and while none of the opponents of the friendship link attended it was encouraging that the new Council member, Daniel Tully did come along and seemed interested in learning about the issue and prepared to make up his own mind about the merits of the friendship link.

### Conclusion

During the visit the delegation had the opportunity to discuss at length with the officers of the Sister Cities Association in Benbrook what steps are possible to reinstate the agreement with Benbrook. Six students from there arrive in Ballymoney at the end of June 2007 for a two week visit and that trip will go ahead as planned. Three parties to the Friendship agreement want it to continue, but one has voted to end it by the narrowest of margins.

It is the view of Benbrook Sister Cities that Ballymoney Borough Council and Ballymoney Twinning Association have done as much as possible at this stage. They remain committed to the making the link work and they feel that the best course of action is to retain contacts between the two Associations and await a change in attitude by Benbrook City Council.