

What Does the Ring Road Submission Say?

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Galway County Council submitted further information to An Coimisiún Pleanála (formerly An Bord Pleanála) to allow them to once again consider whether the road should be given permission. This time around, An Coimisiún Pleanála (ACP) will have to take into account climate legislation. While many of the original documents had to be updated the climate submission is key because that is the piece of the puzzle that was missing when ACP previously granted permission.

While advocates of the ring road might argue that we should ignore or work around the climate legislation, the courts have determined that ACP have to take it into account. So what information were they given?

However this new submission gives no estimate of the change in carbon pollution due to the road. It does give an estimate of a 43% decrease in carbon emission compare to 2018, which is as impressive if it is to be believed. That number is based on the road combined with many other measures outlined in the Galway Transport Strategy and the national Climate Action Plan.

All of those other measures could be implemented independently of the road, but that option is not given much consideration. Instead we are being asked to believe that more roads will improve air quality, but internationally we see that building more roads has increased the level of pollution. There is no clear case made as to why the Galway Ring Road would be exempt from this pattern. ACP will have to decide if this kind of mathematical gymnastics is permitted, where they counteract carbon-costly projects with carbon-savings projects.

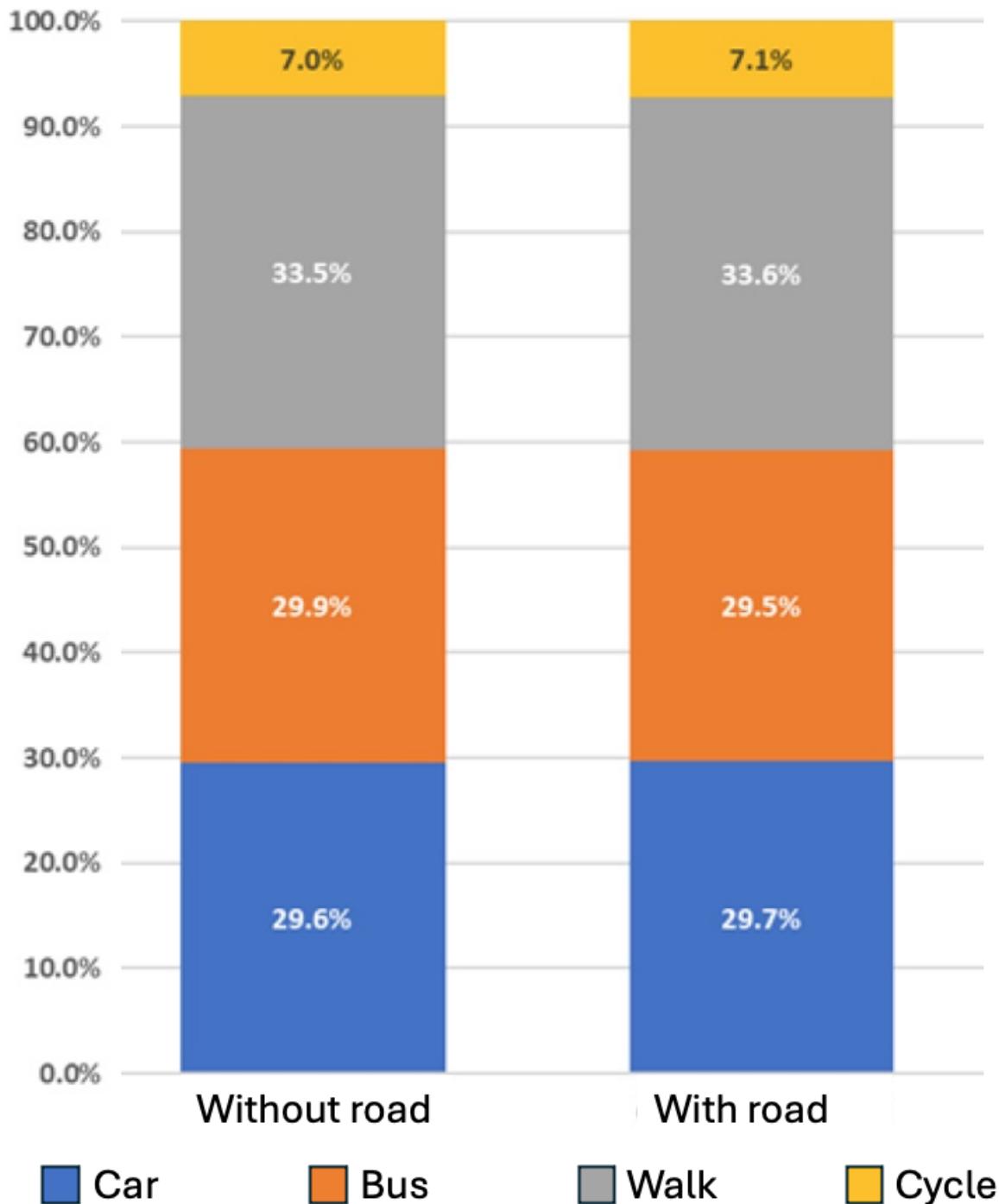
At one point in the submitted documents Galway City Council say “However, as the EIA assessment only considers the effects of the Project, it cannot account for emission reductions associated with additional commitments which will arise from the delivery of the Galway Transport Strategy (GTS) or the most recent approved climate action plan, CAP24.”

But the submission actually combines those projects in all references to levels of greenhouse gas emissions. We are entitled to know what the future looks like with all other planned transport improvements in place but without the ring road, but they have not presented those figures. Can ACP be expected to make a decision on the road with the assumption that all the other measures will go ahead? Can they make a decision on the climate impact of the road if no figures are presented for a fair comparison without the road? Bundling the impact of the road with so many other measures, some of which might never happen, leaves too much uncertainty.

Some of the other measures are completely beyond the control of the Galway County Council or ACP. The pollution estimates use the assumption that all new cars in Ireland

will be battery electric vehicles by 2030. In 2023 EVs accounted for 18% of new registrations and in 2024 that decreased to 14%. It is not realistic to suggest that we will get to 100% a few years from now. Any decision should be based on realistic estimates and not on aspirations.

There is one area where the documents compare our two possible futures of building or not building the ring road. One of the ideas proposed is that increased traffic on a ring road will increase the use of public transport, walking and cycling in the city centre. The diagram below (from Plate 6.21 of the submission) is used to show the potential changes in those alternatives to the private car. It is clear from this graph that adding the road makes less than a 1% change to any mode of travel. But the other planned measures are capable of changing public transport share from 13.2% to 29.9% - a huge improvement which can happen with or without the road. So the idea that the road will reduce car journeys in the city centre is a myth even by the figures presented in favour of the road.



So what are the other measures from the GTS and Climate Action Plan that the submission assumes will be in place to achieve the proposed benefits of the road. The bus connects and cycle lanes are well publicised parts of the GTS and some parts of that are already under way. The CAP measures listed in the submission also include banning free employee parking at workplaces in the city, €5 per hour car parking, a 65% increase in petrol prices and a congestion charge for driving through the city. There is no doubt that these measures would reduce car use in the city centre, but they would also be very unpopular and might be hard for our politicians to push through. Is ACP going to ensure that these measures are conditions of the granting of permission? If they are not

conditions of the permission then they might be conveniently forgotten once the road construction is underway. If that happens then the climate case for the road falls apart.

The onus is on the advocates of the ring road to make their position very clear on dramatically reduced parking in the city and on a congestion charge so that private cars pay every time they cross the Quincentennial or Wolf Tone bridge or drive in the city centre. Any political leaders that believe in delivering the ring road will also have to champion these measures if they claim to be backing the ring road in its entirety.

Perhaps the questions raised here will be addressed after the consideration of public submissions. ACP is expected to start inviting public submissions sometime in July.

Notes:

All ring road documents available at <https://www.leanala.ie/en-ie/case/318217>
Diagram in article is from Plate 6.21.

Submissions open until 1 August 2025