

news

Progress update on 'Mines project

Public information event for Silvermines Hydro

By Thomas Conway

ALMOST 15 years on from its initial conception, the Silvermines Hydro project is suddenly becoming very real. Should all go to plan, the turbines will start turning in 2032 and a little patch of countryside at the foothills of the Silvermines Mountains will be transformed into Ireland's second pumped storage hydropower station, adding to an existing facility in Co Wicklow.

Last Friday and Saturday, Siga Hydro (the company in charge) hosted a public information event designed to brief people on the progression of the project. The lounge of Hickey's Bar in Silvermines village is a popular venue for such community get-togethers and this occasion was no different. A steady stream of curious locals drifted in and out of the pub on the Friday evening, most of them carefully inspecting the various design posters and information placards which decorated the room.

Darren Quinn, the CEO of Siga Hydro and the man in charge of this massive undertaking, was in typically good spirits, carefully surveying it all and chatting affably to locals. He speaks passionately about the project, endorsing the myriad socio-economic and environmental benefits it will deliver. He explains that, from the very outset, from the moment

the idea was first floated, this was a no-brainer for the company.

"We saw this as an opportunity to do something that's clean and good, something that will transform the landscape," he says.

The beauty of the project, Darren suggests, is that it is both environmentally sustainable and financially efficient. He describes the mechanics behind it as "very simple, very reliable and very secure," also referencing the fact that the principles of hydro power extend back through time for "more than a thousand years."

It is hard to disagree with him. The ultimate ambition of this project is to convert the former mining site into a "cutting-edge clean energy" facility to produce a form of energy known as pumped storage hydro power (PSH). PSH is a type of hydroelectric storage in which two water reservoirs at different elevations generate power as water moves down from one reservoir to the other, passing through a turbine or turbines in the process. The facility, once in operation, will have the capacity to store as much as 296 megawatts of electricity, sufficient to power some 185,000 homes or 21,000 small businesses. During the construction phase, it is anticipated to create approximately 400 jobs, with as many as 50 jobs supported thereafter.

MOOD ON THE GROUND

As you might expect, Darren isn't the only member of Siga floating around. The team is out in full force. Greg Finnegan, the Research Lead, is also chatting amicably to locals while Laura



Jennifer Stafford (Silvermines Hydro), Charlotte and Neil Chapman, and Ken Oakley (Silvermines Hydro) at the Silvermines Hydroelectric Power Station Project information evening. PHOTOS: ODHRAN DUCIE

McSherry, Siga's community liaison officer, greets people at the entrance. Laura is in tune with the mood on the ground in the Silvermines. She has spent the past several years actively working with the community and is still eager to get their feedback.

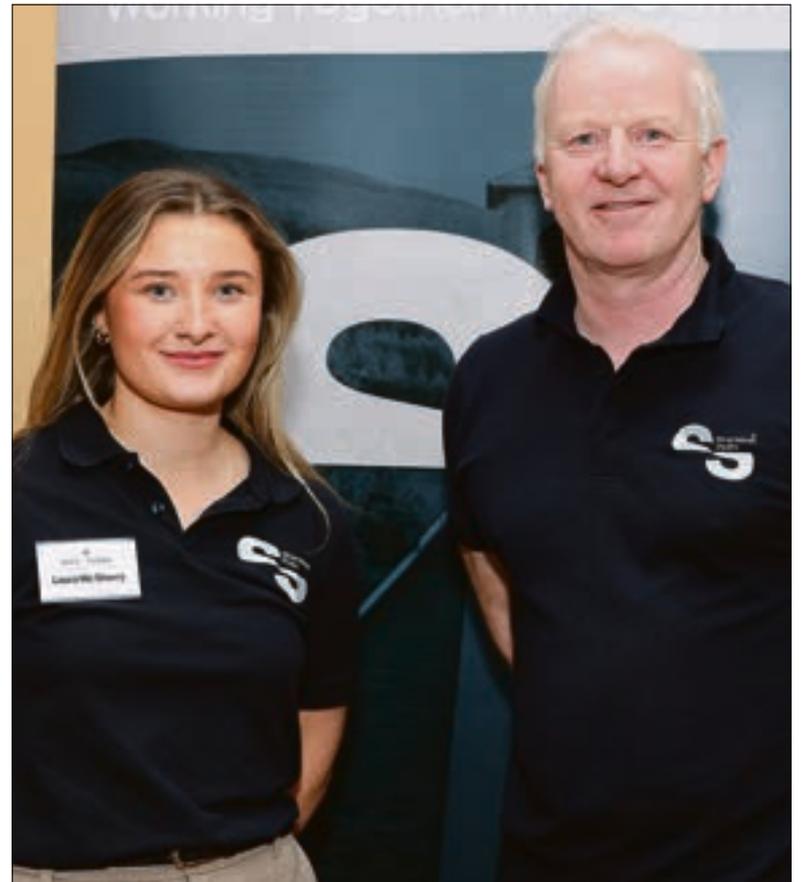
"We've knocked on every door in the Silvermines and talked with members of the community. And they do seem quite positive about the project," she says. "There are one or two worries about issues like construction traffic and things like that, but the people can all see the long-term benefits, they can see what this project can bring to the community, the new possibilities."

One man who can certainly envisage those new possibilities is Joe Gleeson, a former accountant who now lives in Nenagh but previously spent many a weekend morning hiking the beautiful trails around the 'Mines. Incidentally, his daughter, Sarah Gleeson, is a professor of sustainability geoscience at UCD. Needless to say, she is delighted with this development, and the renewed interest in the geological make-up of the area which it has spurred. Joe, too, is unequivocal about the benefits of the project, citing its environmental impact and its tourism potential.

"I see it as a very positive development - making use of what's already there to generate pollution-free electricity, renewable electricity," he says. "What I think is nice is that they're planning to put a tourist centre in with it. They're going to put a walkway around the area. That will bring people in."

TRANSFORMATIVE ENDEAVOUR

There is little doubt that this project is a transformative endeavour, one which has been championed and advanced fervently by local politi-



Laura McSherry and Darren Quinn of Silvermines Hydro at the Silvermines Hydroelectric Power Station Project information evening.

cians. It has even produced a book, "A Heritage of Mines and Miners," which explores the rich geological and social history of the area, once a hub of Ireland's mining industry.

The power station has also been designated by the European Union as a "project of common interest" (PCI). That status is hugely significant, Darren says.

"There are currently two of these PCIs in Ireland. One is the Celtic Interconnector, which is a sub-sea capable

that will connect Ireland to France. And then the other PCI in Ireland is here in Silvermines, so we're in good company. Our project was selected based on the benefit it will deliver to Europe and to Ireland, and over its lifetime the value is estimated at in excess of 5.5 billion euros," he concludes.

That's a lot of economic potential. Siga Hydro, and indeed many people in the Silvermines, are hoping that potential will be fulfilled.



Greg Finnegan (Silvermines Hydro) and Joe Gleeson at the Silvermines Hydroelectric Power Station Project information evening.