

Finneran and Feighan in NAMA blame game

■ Paul Healy

Two local TDs were very much at odds this week on the prospects of whether or not the NAMA measures will result in an upsurge in Ireland's economic fortunes.

Minister Michael Finneran welcomed the EU Commission's approval of NAMA and said that the green light from the Commission shows that Fine Gael was wrong to object to the Government's plans.

"Fine Gael have fought our plans to stabilise the economy and restore the banking sector tooth and nail but, despite this, the Government can now

get on with the business of acquiring loans from the banks so that banks can return to liquidity and credit can be freed up again.

"The EU Competition Commissioner Joaquin Almunia has agreed that taking action in this way is key to cleaning up the balance sheets of our banks. The EU approval for the plan shows that Fine Gael Senator Eugene Regan was wrong to try to delay the process with his 20 page, formal complaint on behalf of Fine Gael to the EU Commission last year. His attempts to stall the plan were not in the national interest and it shows up Fine Gael's style



Minister Michael Finneran and Frank Feighan T.D.

of objecting for objection sake, for what it is.

"Despite the lack of support

from the Opposition, the Government can now proceed with the EU approved NAMA plan

with a view to returning financial stability to our economy and to get our banks lending again," concluded Minister Michael Finneran.

However Fine Gael TD Frank Feighan said that the Finance Minister is making up banking policy on the hoof – while huge numbers of businesses are still being starved of credit.

"Brian Lenihan's banking policy is not delivering, which means that good, bankable businesses are being starved of credit. A new study shows that 59 percent of businesses are being turned down for short-term credit, and 53 percent for long-term credit.

"This is not a credible basis for economic recovery. The tragedy is that Fine Gael has been warning about the folly of Minister's banking strategy since the start. We warned that neither recapitalisation, nor NAMA would get credit flowing. But I can take no satisfaction from the fact that Fine Gael has been vindicated.

"Now is the time to consider a more radical approach involving the creation of good banks with healthy balance sheets and the capacity to lend. Fine Gael's proposal for a National Recovery Bank would get credit flowing almost immediately."

Banning of head shop products welcomed

The Government has announced that a range of products sold in head shops are to be banned by June. Products known as Spice, Charge, Snow Blow, White Ice, Magic, Liquid Ecstasy, BZP derivatives and mephedrone are all to be made illegal. The plans have been widely welcomed and follow widespread protests over head shops throughout the country, not least in Roscommon, where one such premises opened recently.

Welcoming the news, Minister Finneran said that this is just one step in the Government approach to regulating the industry. "I am delighted that a number of products sold in head shops are to be banned soon. There is no doubt that these shops represent a significant threat to young and vulnerable people. The Government is taking a cross-departmental approach to this problem and planning laws and consumer laws are other areas that are currently being investigated.

Local TD Denis Naughten welcomed the news but he has questioned why the ban will only come into force in June. Deputy Naughten, who raised the issue with the Taoiseach on Wednesday morning, said: "Other European countries, including the UK, have already banned many of these life-threatening drugs so I cannot understand



Cllr. Domnick Connolly, Pat Kenny, Jacqui Snype and Lisa Horan pictured on the set of 'The Frontline' on Monday night.

why the Government cannot ban them in Ireland while it awaits formal EU approval.

"My fear is that these chemicals will be moved from other EU countries and dumped on the Irish market, which will push down the price with potentially fatal consequences."

Denis Naughten also requested that the Taoiseach raise the issue of planning permission for head shops with the Minister for the Environment.

Frank Feighan TD has welcomed new laws on 'legal highs' but warned that head shops will still find loopholes to sell alternative products. He added: "We need further, tough regulation, as well as licensing laws for head shops to monitor the sale of legal highs. The reality is that head shops

currently operate as legitimate businesses, and until proper legislation

is implemented they will be still able to sell 'legal highs' containing a variety

of unknown ingredients, many of which pose very serious health risks."

Stronger solutions needed – Connolly

Fine Gael's Cllr. Domnick Connolly has welcomed new legislation banning several 'legal highs' as a victory for the communities that are campaigning against head shops but has called on the Minister for the National Drugs Strategy to close off remaining loopholes facilitating such shops.

Cllr. Connolly, who featured in a debate on the issue on RTÉ's The Frontline on Monday night, said, "The introduction of new regulations that ban the sale of several dangerous products is a victory for the local communities that have campaigned vigorously on this issue in recent months. This is a success for the courageous residents who are standing against the sale of legal highs in our town.

"Head shops currently operate as legitimate businesses in the eyes of the law, and legal highs will still be available until comprehensive regulation is intro-

duced. This is a matter that I intend to raise at the next meeting of Roscommon County Council proposing that we send a resolution to national Government calling for comprehensive licensing and regulation in this area."



Michael Earley and presenter Pat Kenny pictured on 'The Frontline' set on Monday night.

Fundraising table quiz for head shop protest

Following a meeting Friday night last, the Roscommon Anti-Head Shop Group will be continuing their daily protest outside High Times.

RTE got in touch with the group last week, and four members of the committee, Jacqui Snype, Lisa Horan, Michael Earley and Cllr. Domnick Connolly were invited to Frontline with Pat Kenny on Monday night to join in on a discussion on Head Shops.

There will be a fundraising table quiz on Friday 19th of March in JJ's at 9.30 pm with a raffle on the night. Please come along and support. On Wednesday, 24th March, members of the group will travel to Dublin to meet with members of the Government to put forward their petitions, views and anger. Other towns around the country will be joining in the protest. A bus will be provided on the day, so anyone wishing to support the group on this journey, can contact (085) 1910029. Once again, we would like to thank everyone for their continued support.

Roscommon Lions Club's support

At a recent meeting of the Roscommon Lions Club members expressed their support with the organisers of the ongoing protest outside the Head Shop in Roscommon. The incoming District Governor for Ireland, Mr. Charles Mangan, who attended the Lions meeting, also voiced his concern at the apparent lack of regulation of this area and other issues concerning the licensing of this area. He indicated that this issue had been raised in a number of Lions Clubs nationally and was a cause of serious concern.

Roscommon Lions Club has been actively involved in a number of issues concerning young people over the past number of years. In particular the club has initiated a campaign in relation to suicide awareness and general mental health issues, especially in relation to young people. Furthermore the club has established a successful Youth Centre 'The QUAD' in the old Department of Agriculture offices on Circular Road.

The opening of this Head Shop could have a serious detrimental effect on the young people of Roscommon and has the potential to undermine the work and effort of so many to provide basic services for young people in the area. The availability of substances often targeted at young people can lead to serious anti-social problems and lead to future abuse of harder drugs by young people.

The Lions Club would like to see changes made to the legislation covering this whole area of 'Head Shops' and the sale of so-called legal drugs. Having put so much effort into services for young people it would be a pity if outlets such as this undermined this valuable work.