

Horsham Public Meeting 26-03-2020 – notes by Richard Pill

Some 17 people attended the ERTA tabled Public Meeting on Saturday 26th March at the Unitarian Hall in Horsham adjacent to the central bus station. Colin Crawford Chaired the meeting, whilst the Enticotts did refreshments and Richard Pill manned the book stall.

In what was a 'not know who will come' we were pleased to find those who came were of a congenial nature. The one cyclist who turned up was one of our speakers, Mr George Bathurst on the Windsor link. Engineering work on the railways had delayed some trying to get to the meeting, whilst others were more local.

Colin opened the meeting and gave an overview of the canal threat to the old trackbed between part of the former Guildford-Horsham railway and it may still come to an appeal. It stands however thrown out on a technical issue making the presiding council having to re-issue consultation and consider wider opinion. A point is that the canal has other routing options, the railway is not so lucky and needs the corridor of the former track-bed to go on with a broadening to accommodate a fenced off cycle-way and foot-way alongside, hence the idea of a 'green corridor'.

ERTA supports the concept idea of the railway, in modern transit form, being reinstated as a local link. Rail links are connected to a wider rail network and integrally can carry local and wider regional people and goods off local and regional roads like no other comparable transport mode can, cutting emissions, parking issues and other negative pressures too much traffic on roads can bring.

The way ahead is technically fairly mapped out:

1. Get councils and MPs to support the idea and they in turn are better placed and connected to court potential sponsors and funding to commission studies be it business cases, engineering considerations, deviations or relocations where blockages exist and incrementally, starting maybe with Guildford Horsham as Phase 1 via Cranleigh and Phase 2 both the Arundel Curve and Horsham – Shoreham being implemented. This would allow Reading – Brighton direct and as well as Heathrow-Gatwick via Three Bridges.
2. Once formal studies are done and show 'can/what' can be done, then to turn to Government for support, more funding and ultimately go-ahead for delivery.
3. All ERTA can aspire to do is court support including from the public and encourage people to join ERTA, build a group and they in turn take on to involve and make representation to MP's and Councils – who gets there first wins!
4. On timings, at one extreme East-West Rail between Oxford-Bedford-Cambridge has taken 35 years and still is not fully delivered, whereas others like the Borders Railway which has been successful as has other rail links like Ebbw Vale in Wales, been delivered relatively quicker. Many variables and politics can all play a part, as can public pressure and determination for a local rail alternative solution to current trends.

Questions and comments were on land use, state of local roads and the need for a through rail route to optimise usefulness. Previous studies were largely confined to a terminal branch between Guildford and Cranleigh, not Horsham, on that basis Surrey County Council have declared they do not support the rail scheme as no case. Cranleigh needs careful studying to see how sensitively a railway can be implemented either with a deviation and relocation mixture or a new bypass to the west and a new station in the vicinity. The gains of the railway would, on and off the tracks, prove its worth to local areas and wider ends socially, economically and environmentally. Given growth, given trends of local traffic, travel, congestion and much more, the rail link is a vital resource going forward, but this needs to be better appreciated at the heart of the political system, MP's, Councils and Government. The model and dynamic involve could be repeated elsewhere nationwide.

The blocking of the route like at Southwater/Steyping and elsewhere has to be balanced going forward with growing population and no public transport infrastructure able to modal shift people and/or goods by rail in critical corridors like Guildford-Horsham-Shoreham (Reading-South Coast direct and vice versa/not via London) is. It was noted the Brighton Main Line is reaching capacity and needs a relief line bet both Guildford-Horsham-Shoreham and some reinterpretation of a Lewes-Uckfield-Tunbridge Wells missing link as well, one on the eastern flank and our line, taking the western approaches. Brighton arguably the centre of both and radials thereof. Currently the gaps and legacy of closures remains damage done and needs rectifying. The needs have increased, not diminished and so on the social, economic and environmental fronts, personal, collective and structural, these gaps need re-railing.

Mr George Bathurst gave his talk next on what was needed to plug a 300-metre gap between the Slough-Windsor rail link and that of Staines-Waterside Station. There's been protracted highs and lows promoting the scheme. The backers set out to build the case and play by the system. However, the system seems to be cynical of rail and puts more conditions, costs and seeming blockage each time, one ticks a box. The scheme reached GRIP Level 2 out of an 8 step Network Rail ladder. The scheme takes on a 3-sided motorway cordon hedged in by M4, M25 and M3 and a population like Slough, which has grown from 30, 000 in 1980 to 200, 000 today and elsewhere similar trends means we need to use land carefully and rail generally takes less land pro rata of what it carries than trunk or motorway style roads building does. The Windsor link makes a lot of sense and would better serve a top tourist centre and magnet and foster the towns well-being from a number of considerations.

The meeting finished at 16.00 hours and was congenial. We hope to repeat in the Autumn to continue to build and gather support for the rail link's return! Join us.