

The value of rail is understated

Railfuture national rail users conference
Ely 5 November 2007

The railway is one of Ely's biggest assets, Councillor Fred Brown, chairman of East Cambridgeshire District Council told more than 100 rail campaigners who attended Railfuture's national rail conference in Ely.

"It has good rail connections to all over the country," he said. "We have a wonderful railway."

Mayor of Ely Ron Bradney said that Ely has a very exciting future but can only achieve that with the help of the railway.

The value of the railway was also stressed by Transport for London vice chair Dave Wetzel who spoke proudly of having new Electrostar trains built for the London Overground.

He was also upbeat about the Docklands Light Railway.

He said "Last time I spoke, it was RDS and I was chair of London transport committee. We initiated DLR of which I am very proud."

He said the DLR line to City airport was already carrying as much traffic as that predicted for 2010.

He also outlined the background to Thameslink.

He said: "We used to get thousands of letters from the public with suggestions. Among those was one gem, suggesting that Snow Hill tunnel should be reopened."

"We went to British Rail Southern Region and they said 'No we don't want trains coming from Midland Region'.

"Midland Region said it would be like a black hole. 'We would send them down and they would not come back'.

"In essence, BR said it would be a waste of money. We did our own study and cleared the way for Thameslink and the West London line reopening."

At the time of the GLC "fares fair" policy, the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher warned British Rail that for every £1 they accepted from GLC, she would deduct £1 from BR's grant.

Dealing with the current situation on the Underground, Mr Wetzel said PPP contracts on the Underground are a nightmare and should be brought back into the public sector.

But he added: "TfL is pleased with what it is doing but the Underground will be a building site for the next 10 years as TfL catches up with the backlog of maintenance."

"It is a miracle that the Underground operates so well."

Speaking shortly before the Overground was launched, Mr Wetzel said: "We want to run it as a modern Metro. There will be an early morning and late night ser-



A ceremony to launch the London Overground took place on Monday 12 November. The Overground has taken over the suburban routes operated by Silverlink.

Transport for London now owns the stations and trains but services will be run under a seven-year franchise by Hong Kong firm MTR and construction firm Laing.

Initially the North London line, the West London line, Gospel Oak to Barking and Euston to Watford are included. A new fleet of 44 trains, like the one

above, will be introduced on former Silverlink routes at the end of next year. There will be a £400million programme of station upgrades and infrastructure improvements.

The revamped East London line, from Dalston Junction to West Croydon, Crystal Palace and New Cross, will join the Overground in three years time. The following year the ELL line will be connected to the NLL at Highbury and Islington, creating the first step towards an orbital service.

vice and stations with staff all the operating hours. We want more railway lines. We want to run the whole of the London suburban railway as a Metro."

He outlined how money from the increased value of the land should be used to fund rail projects.

He said Canary Wharf was only a success – over 60,000 go to work there – because public money built the railways to serve it.

He said: "Those people get there because you spent the money on the transport infrastructure. Without that transport investment you would not get people there."

Taxpayers paid £3.5billion for the Jubilee line but private landowners have made £13billion out of it.

If you take the wider economic values into account, transport schemes can be profitable.

The Government has partially accepted the idea with a levy on business to pay for a third of the cost of Crossrail.

If Leeds needs a super tram it should be able to make a levy on landowners who will benefit from the line. All major schemes could pay for themselves in this way.

But the Government is turning down scheme after scheme based on flawed cost-benefit analyses when just the rise in land values could pay for the investment.

Buyers who can predict new road and rail links can make a fortune. We should have an annual land

value tax on empty sites. Many other countries have introduced the land value tax and enjoyed the benefits.

More info: www.LabourLand.org

Another speaker, Bob Breakwell, said he was one of the first directors of WAGN when the line through Ely was electrified to King's Lynn in 1992.

He also saw the opening of the line to Stansted Airport.

He said there had been so much growth on the railway that if British Rail was still in charge, it would have been producing a surplus.

He said: "I worked for BR for 33 years and despite the criticism, it was a very fine organisation."

But now the Treasury looks on unhappily at the "£3billion subsidy" to the railways which in 1990 was only £1billion.

He said that although many trains are overcrowded at the moment, there are many ways for the rail industry to tackle the problems.

Longer trains, better signalling and sleek operating practices can be the answer in many cases, said Mr Breakwell, who is a director of First Great Western and First Capital Connect.

Often simple things have to be "proved" by a consultants' study.

He said consultants charged £500,000 for a study into introducing 12-coach services to Stansted Airport, which he was operating there in 1991. But he said Britain

was not the only country to have problems. The Paris-Lyon high-speed route is full to capacity with an 18-coach double decker train passing through every three minutes.

He said Germany coped very well with large numbers of passengers but he was most impressed watching the operation of trains on the high-speed route between Tokyo and Osaka.

There were trains going through all the time with fast and semi-fast looped to allow a 170 mph train to speed through on what was basically a double track main line.

In Britain, the industry is doing well, with Network Rail co-operating with the Department for Transport, the Treasury, and the Office of Rail Regulation.

But there is still a jaundiced view of the industry from politicians.

He said many of the cuts imposed on people in the First Great Western area was a result of a "prescriptive" timetable from the DfT. But the most energetic protesters had benefited by having some of the cuts reinstated in the December 2007 timetable.

But he admitted that the Cotswold line was "challenging" and is "in a mess at the moment".

In questions, Julie Boston of the Friends of Severn Beach Railway said: "We can't trust FGW. There are constant cancellations. The RMT want the railways back in public ownership."

Mr Breakwell said train operators had to get approval from the DfT to hire extra trains.

"Every time we try to get trains, every deal is vetoed by the DfT," he said. The DfT also vetoed a deal to get rid of Pacers in Cornwall.

Derek Potter of the Cotswold Line Promotion Group said: "When FGW is bad, the Cotswold line is awful. It is 86 miles and two thirds is single track."

He told rail campaigners to get to know their line better than the train operator Network Rail. He added: "Local councils have public transport officers. We cultivate them."

"You need someone who is good on timetables and someone good on fares. You only need consultants to calculate things like net asset value. Do as much of the spade work as possible yourselves. You need to tell managers what is going wrong."

Another speaker, Robert Stripe of the Fen Line Users said: "You are sitting within a mile of where the buffers might have gone up in 1985. We were told then that a bus could do it better from Ely to King's Lynn."

He added: "At Ely we have now more train movements than at Crewe. This is the Crewe of the East."