



ABBEY FLYER USERS' GROUP

Watford Junction to St Albans Abbey Line

Abbey Flyer Users' Group (ABFLY)

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Cllr Derrick Ashley
Executive Member for Environment, Planning and Transport
Chairman, Abbey Line Community Rail Partnership (CRP)
Hertfordshire County Council
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Pegs Lane
Hertford
SG13 8DQ

c/c Edna Woname, Abbey Line CRP Officer
Abbey Line CRP Steering Group (via e-mail)
Richard Harrington MP
Anne Main MP
Dorothy Thornhill, Mayor of Watford
Peter Roberts, Chairman – ACORP
Stephen Sleight, Marston Vale CRP Officer

28th September 2016

Dear Cllr Ashley

It is with great concern that we note HCC's preference for converting the Abbey Line to a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) route, as proposed in the draft 'Transport Vision 2050'.

You will have noted that just over one year ago, in summer 2015, over 80% of respondents to the Hertfordshire Rail Strategy consultation expressed their opposition to such a scheme, and their support for retaining and enhancing the Abbey Line as a rail service. It appears that these views have been roundly ignored in the preparation of the Transport Vision.

We feel that in putting your name to Transport Vision 2050, a report which essentially calls for the closure of the Abbey Line, your position as Chairman of the Community Rail Partnership is now untenable, and we call on you to resign. The CRP is charged with improving the fortunes of the line as a rail route. This is now completely and publicly at odds with HCC's vision of its future.

Until such action is taken, and with great regret, ABFLY is withdrawing as a partner in the CRP with immediate effect.

Our opposition to BRT is borne not out of dogmatic worship for railways, it is out of genuine concern for:

- Passenger comfort and perception – it is widely acknowledged that given a choice, people see rail / light rail as a superior mode to bus, and would be more encouraged to switch to rail should the service be enhanced. It is noteworthy that bus usage has been on a steady downward trend outside London since 1986, whilst rail usage is at record high levels.
- Loss of network benefits - removing the line from the rail system means that people would see it as 'just another bus route', rather than as a feeder to the rest of the rail network.
- Environmental impact – despite the 'greenwash' offered by proponents of this technology, a simple appreciation of physics confirms that the rolling resistance of a rubber-tired vehicle on a concrete track is significantly higher than steel wheels on steel rail.

Furthermore the imposition of BRT would imply withdrawal of the existing Overhead Line Equipment (OHLE) which allows trains / light rail to operate with zero emissions at the point of use. One assumes that the buses operating under BRT would have to be self-powered, each having to carry around their own power unit, with consequent penalty for weight and hence fuel consumption. If diesel-powered, this raises serious questions about the impact on local air quality.

The consequences of pouring thousands of tonnes of concrete to create the guideways in itself is a CO2-intensive activity, additionally noting that doing so through Bricket Wood would be to do so within a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

- Reliability and cost – the Cambridge to St Ives BRT has been a costly and unreliable failure, I refer you to: <http://www.railfuture.org.uk/article1545-Paving-over-tracks> for further details. Do we really want that replicated in Hertfordshire?

Moreover there are many supplementary unanswered questions.

As you know, ABFLY have long been calling for an increase in the service frequency on the single track line, which provides a train every 45mins in each direction. We believe this can be achieved by installing a 'passing loop' and bringing in a second train to operate a higher frequency shuttle. The costs of building a passing loop are thought to be somewhere between £4m and £7m based on historical estimates.

Whilst the Hertfordshire Rail Strategy, published last July, dismisses the passing loop as, *"unlikely to be considered by funders as a priority, as it would require provision of two train sets and train crew in place of the current one, making it difficult to achieve a favourable business case"*, no such business case has ever been presented for public scrutiny, and in any case it is thought to be severely undermined by a high level of usage going unrecorded because of ticketless travel on the branch. This issue has recently been acknowledged by the Department for Transport's own figures.

Do we truly understand the business case for a passing loop / extra train? Does HCC have a thorough appreciation of the technical options and their associated capital costs, the operating costs, the numbers on which revenue projections are based - and how they are adjusted, or should be, for significant under-reporting in ticket sales data.

Network Rail have consistently failed to rise to the challenge of the original Community Rail Development Strategy (2005), which was to provide infrastructure enhancements that were tailored to more appropriate standards for branch lines and rural routes, rather than gold-plating everything in the way they do for main lines. But why take NR's word for it? Why not challenge some of the private contractors for a price?

We would like to see the business case for a £90m busway.


Furthermore, why exactly can Light Rail not be revisited? This appeared to die a death in 2013 rather needlessly due to contractual issues concerning the ownership of the infrastructure and through-ticketing, both details which could, and should, have been resolved. At the time we were promised a 'Lessons learned' report. This was never published. Note, ABFLY were broadly supportive of the Light Rail scheme.

Rail technology has moved on. A rail / passing loop solution does not imply having to do it exclusively with heavy rail or conventional light rail as per 'Supertrams'. Intermediate modes are now being developed – for example the 'Ultra / Very Light Rail' concept established by the likes of Parry People Movers and the Warwick Manufacturing Group. Both are developing self-powered, low-emission railcars which could (combined with a higher service frequency) provide a very attractive service in the short to medium term without significant and costly alteration of the existing infrastructure.

The heavy rail rolling stock market has also moved on. In August, Abellio won the Greater Anglia franchise and have committed to replace almost all of the ex-BR rolling stock with new build. This has been nicknamed a 'mass extinction event' in the rail industry and could result in hundreds of perfectly useable (if ageing) ex-BR rail vehicles becoming redundant. Rolling stock leasing companies (ROSCOs) are thought to be offering these legacy fleets at increasingly attractive rates in order to keep their assets employed, some commentators have even talked about the £1 lease. A bit of cajoling with the two remaining West Midlands franchise bidders in line with a commitment from HCC to thoroughly re-examine the business case for the passing loop (openly, honestly and involving us in the process) could bring some quick results on this one.

We remain deeply disappointed not only at HCC's insistence on pushing BRT, but also at the persistent failure to think creatively and to challenge the received wisdom about rail-based solutions.

Yours sincerely



Dave Horton
Chairman, The Abbey Flyer Users' Group (ABFLY)