

Railwatch

AN INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR RAIL USERS

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A bridge too far

SPECTACULAR: Scotland's Forth Bridge was needed to span the Firth of Forth. A similar watery barrier will now be allowed to block England's East-West rail link. Who will pay for such a bridge these days? If it was a road, maybe.

Picture: NETWORK RAIL

This is Britain's most famous rail bridge - the Forth Bridge.

The bridge, a vital artery on Scotland's rail network, was opened in 1890 with two spans of 570 yards and has been hailed an engineering marvel ever since.

But thanks to a decision by Bedfordshire County Council another massive bridge will now be needed if ever the East-West rail link in southern England is to be reopened on its original alignment.

The council - despite claiming to support the rail link - has approved a planning application for a rowing lake at Willington, slap bang across the route of the rail link.

According to railway bridge experts consulted by the Bedfordshire Rail and Transport Association, the railway bridge now needed would have to have a span of 130 yards, which would put it in second place to the Forth Bridge.

The cost of the Bedfordshire rail bridge would be about £75million for the main span and £25million each for two smaller 65 yard spans.

To achieve a rail level of five yards above the water, a two-mile embankment stretching almost back to Bedford would also be needed. Why have planners and politicians made things so difficult for the East-West rail link in order

to benefit the minority involved in rowing? The councillors were told public opinion favoured the re-opening of the railway and not the rowing lake although the local *Bedfordshire on Sunday* newspaper has run a consistently pro-rowing lake campaign.

Willington falls within the area of the Government Office for the East of England which in its short lifetime has become notorious for its anti-rail stance.

Just to rub salt into the wounds, the Government has recently overseen the opening of a £59million five-mile bypass at Great Barford, near Willington. It has also given £17million for a Ridgmont bypass and Woburn link. Both these roads are on the East-West rail route but nationally even more money is being wasted on building roads.

The cost of the biggest road schemes rose by £1million a day in the summer. The Department for Transport raised the budgets of 10 projects from £305million to £403million over a three month period.

Back in the Bedfordshire backwoods, Councillor John Scott said the decision to approve the rowing lake proves Bedfordshire County Council is "a forward thinking can-do authority that can approve big schemes". Can he be serious?

The East-West rail link is part of the South East Regional Policy although the Government Office for the East of England managed to get it excluded from its East of England regional spatial strategy, published in June, one month before Bedfordshire's decision. A strange achievement for a quango that calls itself GO-East.

For rail users GO-East spells NO-GO.

Railfuture and other organisations have asked for the Government to set up a public inquiry into Bedfordshire's decision.

We are shocked that such a stupid decision could have been made and angry that the Railfuture petition against the rowing lake was not even presented to the planning committee which made the decision in July.

But this is not just a local failure by the local council and NO-GO-RAIL East, it is a spectacular failure of Government transport policy.

The East-West rail consortium has been trying to get rails back on the Oxford-Cambridge axis for years.

Until the rowing lake decision, it would have been one of Britain's most cost-effective transport schemes. By rebuilding nine miles of missing track, trains could have run again between Oxford, Milton

Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge. It is obviously not just a local scheme. It has national significance but it appears not even the Government or GO-East can see it. Are they blind? At the least, they should have protected the rail route for the future.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has meanwhile been trying to develop a policy of growth along the alignment of the East-West rail link.

Bedford Borough Council is poised to block another rail development by approving plans for houses at Turvey on the route of the Bedford-Northampton line which was recommended for reopening by the Government multi-modal studies.

Send your objections to Bedford Borough Council, Head of Planning, Town Hall, Bedford MK40 1SH and say you support the rail link. Send a copy to BRTA rail campaigner Patrick Rawlinson, 57 The Drive, Northampton NN1 4SH.

NO-GO-RAIL East is also involved in trying to wreck the Luton-Dunstable rail line and replace it with a busway misleadingly called Translink. A decision is expected from central Government soon, probably in October.

railfuture