

New railways through old towns

By Michael Weinberg

It is sometimes said that the reason France can get high-speed lines built and we cannot – apart from the Channel Tunnel rail link – is that France has loads of wide open spaces with sparse populations, while we are an overcrowded island with no spare room.

However, increasingly this argument is being discounted by developments elsewhere in the world with new lines being built extensively in urban areas.

An example is the Alameda Corridor in Los Angeles.

This £1.2billion project was begun in May 1997 and is due to open next year.

It will provide a 32-kilometre freight route linking the port areas of Los Angeles and Long Beach with central Los Angeles freight yards from where trains will fan out to the rest of the USA.

These two ports account for 25% of all US waterborne international trade and are the two busiest container ports in the USA.

The central portion of the corridor consists of a 15.2 metre-wide trench built 10 metres below ground alongside the heavily industrialised Alameda Street. From the street the corridor is barely visible.

The project will consolidate 90 miles of rail track, allow trains to move at higher speeds, and eliminate 200 delay-causing level-crossings.

Port and city officials expect the corridor to greatly reduce lorry traffic, ease congestion, and improve air quality. The line is expected to carry 100 trains a day and has been combined with a huge increase in on-dock rail facilities recently completed and under construction.

Finance is coming from bonds, £700million, repaid from access charges by Union Pacific and BNSF, a £250million loan from the federal Department of Transportation, £280million grant from the two ports and £350million in federal, state and local grants.

The Alameda corridor is considered so significant to the Californian and US economies in speeding the movement of cargo that Congress has designated it "a project of national significance".

This amply demonstrates that with political will large-scale rail works are possible even in heavily urbanised regions. This point is emphasised by the

Betuwe line project in Holland, a country with an even more dense urban population than ourselves, and which has faced a concerted degree of opposition from some of the areas through which it is due to pass.

It is a new freight railway linking Rotterdam and Germany that will be ready in 2005. It will give the Dutch port an excellent link to the European network.

The internal port railway is already being rebuilt, doubled and electrified and many terminals have their own rail connections.

The line is 160 kilometres long with five tunnels and 130 bridges or viaducts, which

agenda, and countries such as Germany and Switzerland are investing heavily in rail projects."

Where do we get such forward thinking in Britain, beyond some vague hope of switching a bit of freight from road to rail, if possible, an objective which may or may not be met and which is scuppered at the first sign of resistance from road hauliers by a huge reduction in vehicle excise duty, a reduction in diesel fuel prices, and the introduction of 44 tonne lorries?

And this is in a country with hardly any inland shipping and already the most congested roads in Europe. Again, accord-

virtually no help to Britain. And what of the railway? Zilch. Even when funds were available from Europe to electrify it, this was refused. Result? No rail freight to speak of between Britain and Ireland, let alone international freight.

"To address capacity issues, the Dutch government decided in 1994 to build a dedicated double-track freight railway stretching 160 kilometres between Rotterdam and the German border."

And, "Laying 160 km of railway in a densely built-up and highly regulated country requires extreme care and meticulous planning. As an indication of the complexity, the acquisition of 3,300 plots of land, some needing soil treatment, required negotiations with 1,450 landowners."

Despite this there was, of course, opposition. The route has been divided into six sections, each with its own information officer to maintain direct links with the local community.

A rail transport user group has also been established made up of businesses that consider the link vital to future logistic chains.

"Up to now, the dominant voice in public opinion has been from opponents of the project. Now, behind the scenes, people are explaining why it is a good thing.

"The issue revolves not so much around the line itself, but the need to boost rail's share of the freight market. Road congestion is a growing problem, increasing costs."

"The project management organisation believes that public support is intimately linked with image. The starting point is to underline the benefits for the local community.

"Winning the battle for hearts and minds requires good internal communications too. If a project organisation wants to be ready for its tasks, everyone within the organisation must be adequately briefed.

"Any external message or representation is pointless if the internal organisation cannot live up to them."

Several lessons here, surely, for our own government and the Central Railway project.



The Redondo Junction railroad bridge provides a faster route for Amtrak and Metrolink trains in and out of Los Angeles Union Station. This grade separation eliminates a conflict between freight, passenger and motorists. The bridge was completed in August and commuters on the Amtrak and Metrolink enjoy a faster and efficient ride in and out of Union Station without holding up freight trains.

accounts for the huge cost of the project, roughly £3billion.

But listen to the reasoning behind it by the project director Leendert Bouter.

"Economic growth is only possible when international trade and transport can increase. On average we forecast transport growth of 1% faster than the national economy, and international transport will grow faster than transport in general.

"It is impossible for the Netherlands to meet this demand with lorries alone, and though inland shipping is booming, its growth has economic and natural limits.

"This has put rail freight firmly back on the international

ing to Mr Bouter, standing in the way of increasing freight on Dutch railways "is a severe capacity shortage on the rail network, which is mostly occupied by passenger traffic during the daytime."

Does that sound familiar?

"The Netherlands' capacity to handle international rail freight falls short of what is needed."

And what about Britain's? The roads to and from the Welsh ports have been vastly improved mainly for the benefit of trade between Europe and Ireland. The road along the North Wales coast has been smashed through this lovely area to get lorries to and from Holyhead for the Irish trade,

