

Railwatch

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Double yellow signal at last

The signals finally seem set for a big programme of rail expansion.

But many rail projects are not yet at the drawing board stage while road building schemes are all planned and ready to go immediately.

Even through the fog of conflicting messages from the Government about car use, the next signal for rail looks like being a full-speed ahead.

The Strategic Rail Authority now has a £7billion modernisation fund - part of the Government's 10-year £180billion plan for transport which is aimed at reversing decades of under-investment.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has also promised lower regulated fares and expansion to allow for 50% more passengers and 80% more freight on the railways.

The Government says the money will be divided up so that £60billion goes to the railways, £59billion to roads and nearly £26billion for local transport schemes.

The reality is however a little different when you look into the detailed charts accompanying the plan.

Over the 10-years, roads will get the lion's share of public money, about £35billion, while railways will get only £15billion from the Chancellor.

The railways are expected to attract £35billion of private sector investment while roads will only have to attract £5billion.

Several months of distorted propaganda and adroit use of the gullible tabloid press by the road lobby have paid off.

There will be 100 new bypasses, widening of 360 miles of motorways and trunk roads and 80 major trunk road schemes.

As usual the railways will have to do their best with the resources available. At least ministers now say light rail is the one of the best ways of attracting people out of their cars. Mr Prescott predicted that



More customers are being attracted to the Wrexham-Bidston line after it was re-branded the Borderlands Line in July. Our picture shows community rail officer Michael Clutton, left, and First North Western's assistant general manager, Ben Davies, at Wrexham with the new logo, and with representatives from Railtrack, Merseytravel and four supportive councils - Cheshire, Flintshire, Wirral and Wrexham. As a result of the publicity, even car drivers are beginning to learn that it is much better for them, and everyone else, if they travel on the 26-mile 14-station line instead of using their cars. Let's hope that the much-vaunted 10-year transport plan means the Borderlands Line receives the support it should from Government.

up to 25 new light rail systems could be provided out of the money for local transport.

With a host of studies yet to report on how particular problems would best be tackled, many of the improvements will take years even to start and will entail upheaval.

Only road schemes have been given simple grants of public money and simple go-aheads.

Mr Prescott told the Commons: "I hope people will understand that to make the kind of changes we're embarking upon will create inconvenience and problems, but at least people can be aware that we are making the long-term decisions and dealing with the cause not the symptoms of a congested system."

Mr Prescott told the House of Commons the plan would

"rebuild our infrastructure, cut congestion, improve public transport and give people choice".

Mr Prescott told MPs: "Decades of under-investment and the lack of strategic planning had left us with a transport system in crisis."

Now, he added, the 10-year plan offered "new ideas, new powers, new resources - a new approach for a new century".

In practical terms that is said to provide for 6,000 new train carriages. Apart from the rail schemes, which apply to England, Scotland and Wales, the plan applies only to England.

The £25billion for transport in London over 10 years could revive the CrossRail scheme but there could also be Thames river

crossings in East London for road and rail.

The English, Welsh and Scottish railway said it was delighted with the news that £4billion is to be spent on rail freight over the next 10 years.

Philip Mengel, chief executive, said: "Using rail for moving goods provides huge benefits for the economy and industry."

Mick Rix, general secretary of the train drivers' union Aslef said: "I welcome the new money going into the industry, but there must be concern that because the railways are in private hands, much of the cash may disappear into shareholders' pockets rather than be used to upgrade the network."

Check the plan out yourself at: <http://www.detr.gov.uk/trans2010/index.htm>