

Rail at risk from cuts

All the political parties have been warning about impending budget cuts, following the economic problems caused by the failure of the big banks.

Rail campaigners have been worried that, as in the past, rail projects could be at risk.

But with a growing awareness that increasing use of rail can prevent problems caused by climate change, we can point out the massive benefits, including low emissions per passenger kilometre.

Rail infrastructure investment also leads to regeneration paybacks that road building cannot deliver.

That has not however prevented the road lobby from calling for investment to be switched from rail to road.

The TaxPayers' Alliance, which has been promoting the idea of public spending cuts to gullible journalists and newspaper editors for the past five years, revealed its true colours by calling for rail cuts and issuing "new research" jointly with the "Drivers' Alliance".

The TaxPayers' Alliance, however, has refused to reveal who its donors are. In 2007 it published "abbreviated" accounts, which meant income and expenditure were withheld.

The "Drivers' Alliance" opposes road pricing and congestion charging. Its slogans include: "Don't let them tax you out of your car" and "Don't let them tax you on to public transport."

As the Campaign for Better Transport quickly pointed out: "Cutting railways back would be the worst possible way of helping motorists. Without railways, many of our cities would grind to a halt and there would be many more juggernauts."

CBT's executive director Stephen Joseph added: "All the evidence is that road building projects are incredibly expensive and lead to more traffic. This is a recipe for more congestion, casualties and pollution." CBT pointed out that

rail spending is high at present because of historic under-investment, which is now slowly being put right. The Taxayers' Alliance had failed to mention several road costs, including the costs of casualties, pollution and policing, as well as the cost of congestion itself.

CBT said that, when these figures are taken into account, road users are undertaxed rather than overtaxed.

Road building is now extremely expensive. A £1.2billion cut in rail spending would buy just 21 miles of new road (the A14 scheme east of Huntingdon).

Most sensible people now recognise that road building is an ineffective way of solving congestion and can generate extra traffic, thus wiping out time savings.

But some rail projects have already been axed, notably the Glasgow Airport Rail Link, by the Scottish Finance Secretary John Swinney in September.

Railfuture Scotland's Ken Sutherland is fighting to get GARL reinstated.

He has congratulated CBI Scotland on giving its support to GARL.

The CBI said GARL could have been rescued if savings had been made elsewhere.

There have also been reports that the £5.5billion Thameslink programme could be cut back by £750million and that the £16billion London Crossrail plan could be at risk.

Bedford Commuters Association has already appealed to MPs to intervene to prevent any Thameslink cutbacks.

For more information, see an alternative website which questions the claim of the TaxPayers' Alliance to speak for ordinary people: www.taxpayersalliance.org/

It says: "For an organisation so concerned with transparency, the TaxPayers' Alliance is surprisingly opaque about its own finances. The problem is that it isn't an alliance of ordinary taxpayers at all."

Railfuture national draw winners 2009

£500: Dr Brian Beeley, Albany Hill, Tunbridge Wells. **£200:** Mr C Moore, Curling Court, Rainham, Gillingham, Kent. **£100:** John Rogers, Llewellyn Street, Nantymoel, Penybont ar Ogwr. **£50:** Roger Blake, Dynevor Road, Stoke Newington, London.

£20 winners

Mr A P Koolman, Fairfield Road, Bromley, Kent, Mr R Kennedy, Sairard Gardens, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, Mr D Riley, Trevethan Road, Falmouth, Cornwall, Mrs Waide, Woodfield Road, Shrewsbury.

£10 winners

Mr J Biggin, Stiles Avenue, Marple, Stockport, Mr C J Perry, Auburn Avenue, Londwell Green, Bristol, Mr and Mrs P Mackness, Sulgrave, Banbury, Mr Griffin, Spring Street, Cannock, Mr J S Mitchell, Colmore Avenue, Spital, Wirral, Mr N W Bramhall, Ringway, Thornton-Cleveleys, Lancashire, David Townsend, Monmouth Road, Oxford, Mr Michael Humphrey, Hill Grove, Romford, Essex.

New Corby inspires rail campaigners

Railfuture staged its rail reopenings conference in Corby in November to celebrate the opening earlier in the year of the town's new £17million "station to be proud of".

Local campaigners fought a long and sustained campaign to get their station back after it closed in 1966 and then briefly reopened in 1987 with a shuttle service to Kettering, only to close again in 1990.

Railfuture's Jim Wade said: "Lobbying has been a way of life for Elisabeth Jordan and me for years."

But he added: "Lobbying is not just about letter writing and attending meetings."

This time, passengers were full of admiration for the station which opened in February with a minimal service, augmented to an approximately hourly frequency from April.

Timetabling is still a problem, with changes at Kettering needed to speed up journey times, but the service should improve once Network Rail is able to upgrade the signalling.

And campaigners would like to see more trains going beyond Corby - which was on the Midland Railway's fast route to Nottingham - to Melton Mowbray and Oakham.

The station which was prefabricated and arrived on the backs of "lots and lots of lorries" has an adjoining bus stand with bus departures clearly indicated on a dot matrix screen. There are plans to integrate more local bus services into the station.

Corby councillor Mark Pengelly paid tribute to Jim Wade, David Fursdon and Elisabeth Jordan.

He also said help from local MP Phil Hope was crucial.

Mr Pengelly said funds for the station came from several different government organisations.

But the investment is already paying off.

A Taiwanese company is moving into town - and creating 500 new jobs - specifically because of the new rail passenger service.

Regular freight trains, carrying new cars, also arrive in the town each day.

But even with a new station, there are still problems. In November, the SouthEastern website did not recognise that Corby had a station, nine months after it opened.

And locals pointed out other drawbacks. The station has no ATM, no public telephone, only one public toilet and only four seats on the station.



DAY ONE: Corby station at 06.25 on the day it opened

Pictures by Jim Wade and Elisabeth Jordan



IN FOCUS: Elisabeth Jordan interviewed for TV



East Midlands Trains chief Tim Shoveller who was a speaker at Railfuture's Corby reopenings conference



Railfuture campaigner David Fursdon is delighted to be able to take the train from Corby at last



IN TUNE: The town band celebrates the opening



Birthday cake, above, and departure board, below



The value of reopening

After the success of the Corby station reopening, which has attracted twice as many passengers as had been expected, delegates at the Railfuture reopenings conference were hoping other stations and even new lines would follow.

Railfuture director Colin Elliff put the case for a high-speed route from London to the north of England, using the Woodhead tunnel route in the Pennines.

He said it would be £10billion cheaper than the published Network Rail options.

He outlined various options to bring the tunnels back into use for high-speed rail.

Brian Barnsley of Association of Community Rail Partnerships said campaigners should be able to show that railways can deliver not just transport solutions but also benefits for education, health, leisure, shopping and regeneration.

"Rail has lots to offer," he said. "But we may have to convince the next government of that. This one is already convinced of rail's value."

Acorp had also produced material for schoolchildren at key stages 2 and 3.

He added: "Children become the environment's keenest advocates."

He asked why the Highways Agency was reluctant to signpost the way to rail stations from motorways.

Tim Shoveller of East Midlands Trains said there was a huge shortage of trains throughout Britain.

He said this was partly because plans for new diesel trains are being put on hold because of the industry's new positive attitude to electrification.

He too questioned why the Highways Agency would not allow signs to stations. But he added: "Even though there is only one sign on the M1 motorway, some drivers still find their way there."

"There are still 250 cars in the car park at the new East Midlands Parkway station."

On the question of where the next station on the East Midlands network might be, he said it was probably Rushden, Northants, but the initiative would have to come "from elsewhere", not EMT.

And in response to pleas for more stations north from Corby - to allow the many Scots in the town to visit Scotland - he said there

were no spare trains available, there were pathing problems, and it would require large amounts of public subsidy. Overcrowding was highlighted by Steve Abbott of Travelwatch East Midlands. Trains on the Liverpool-Nottingham-Norwich route were severely overcrowded on much of the route and trains often left people behind.

He said: "Every train is a pack train at some point on the route."

"Catering trolleys were abandoned for a while because they could not get down the train."

Problems on the route had prompted the Train Sardine protest last year.

The struggle to get simple problems sorted out was highlighted by Jim Bamford, rail officer for Nottinghamshire County Council.

He said British Rail had a plan ready in 1978 to realign the tracks through Market Harborough.

Work was started, but the then Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe cut the budget and the scheme has not yet been reinstated.

He warned that Regional Development will take an increasing role in rail planning, as the existing regional assemblies are phased out.

Investment in new rail lines and services could be justified to the planners as ways to reduce carbon dioxide in the fight against climate change.

But Nigel Phillips of the High Wycombe Amenity Society said Buckinghamshire County Council had been lukewarm in its response to the idea of reopening Bourne End to High Wycombe.

Railfuture director Ian McDonald said the line could have a strategic potential as a through route to Maidenhead and Heathrow.

Conference report

For a 20-page all-colour report of the conference, please send £2 cheque (payable to Railfuture) to the address below.

The report will be despatched in January. People who attended the conference will receive it automatically.

Copies of the reports on Railfuture's London (November 2008) and Northallerton (July 2009) conferences are also available for £2 each.

Send your orders to Railfuture Reports, 67 Guildford Park Avenue, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7NH.