

East West Rail Meeting
Tuesday 18th July 6-7:30pm
Edith Cavell Primary School, Manton Lane, Bedford, MK41 7NH

Mayor Tom Wootton – Elected Mayor of Bedford Borough

Craig Austin – Director for Environment

Jon Shortland – Chief Officer for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Growth

Question: Where do EWR think the project is at the moment?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) EWR gave a route update announcement in May this year which is what they will formally propose in due course. A statutory consultation is due to take place in the first half of 2024. Once the statutory consultation has been completed and responses have been received, a development consent order submission will take place which asks the planning service at a national level to grant planning for the works. This is expected to happen in 2025 and could lead to construction beginning in 2027. We are not sure which part of the line will be constructed first.

Question: What is the Mayor's position towards EWR? Do you support northern route?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) EWR coming through the centre of the town is bad news for Bedford. I have been against it since day one, reasons include for the amount of fumes and pollution it will cause as well as houses having to be knocked down. Therefore the northern route does not make sense to me. If however, EWR can provide the business case, environmental study, finances and the like that we can examine and understand, I will of course look at it.

Question: Do you see a business case for Bedford?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) At the moment there is no business case. I have spoken with Richard Fuller MP about this who also agrees. I don't think that you can't build a railway on the chance it will make money.

(Jon Shortland) Bedford Borough Council has employed SLC rail, a firm of railway specialist consultants. Bedford Borough Council have asked SLC to look at the routes which have been proposed by EWR. SLC have been asked to look at the benefits of each of the routes as well as financial costs and other costs (e.g. residents losing their homes). EWR have not compared the 5 routes on a level playing field. EWR have also mentioned that flooding could be an issue in the town but have not presented their research to Bedford Borough Council as yet. Bedford Borough Council are also employing JBA, flooding consultants, to get advice on this. Internally, Bedford Borough Council are using air quality monitors so data is available to be measured against when EWR is up and running.

Question: How can you motivate people to respond to consultations?

Answer: (Craig Austin) The Mayor has arranged for this event to take place tonight which is designed to help motivate residents. More of these style sessions will take place in due course. So we believe these meetings will help motivate residents.

Question: Have you employed any economists to look at the scheme?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) At the moment no, because EWR have not presented a business case to us. If we do see the business case, we would consider using SYSTRA who Bedford Borough Council have previously used for this type of work.

Question: What happened with data from the first (informal) consultation? Residents should know what the results were and Bedford Borough Council should be able to access it.

Answer: The first consultations were done by EWR so they have the data. A consultation document has since been issued and is available on the EWR website.

Question: What is the economic case for EWR?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I have not yet been given the economic case and neither has Bedford Borough Council.

(Jon Shortland) EWR are hinting that the economic case is coming soon but have not specified a date yet.

Question: Where will people park if they use the station for EWR?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) EWR proposals show they plan to include a multi storey car park.

Question: Where is the money coming from for EWR?

Answer: (Craig Austin) We don't know. That is a matter for Central Government.

Question: Will Bedford Borough Council make the business case available?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) Bedford Borough Council doesn't have the business case, only an economic analysis which was completed by SYSTRA and is already available.

Question: There is an opportunity for a judicial review to happen with regards to EWR proposals. Would Bedford Borough Council fund a judicial review to stop EWR?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I said I would fight it all the way, I can and I will.

Question: Our local ward Councillors want a 4 track solution. Where does Bedford Borough Council stand with this view?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) We have had consultants say there is no reason why it can't be 4 tracks. Very few trains use the slow tracks at the moment. At current, only 1-2 freight trains an hour are used on the tracks which EWR could also use. Bedford Borough Council will continue to make the case to EWR that 4 tracks are sufficient.

Question: What is the procedure for a Judicial Review?

Answer: (Craig Austin) We can provide a written answer to this as at the moment we are unsure*

Question: Is it possible for Bedford Borough Council to take this to judicial review?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) It is possible for a local authority to take a case to judicial review.

Question: How is the Mayor going to make sure that as many people in Bedford are aware of EWR and getting messages across to the public?

Answer: The Mayor will continue to run sessions like the one taking place at Edith Cavell. Bedford Borough Council will also use social media, email and the usual broadcast media.

Question: What evidence was given to Councillors in February 2021 in advance of them voting to support EWR?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) Very little information was given to Councillors in advance which is why I cannot understand why Councillors voted for it.

Question: How will you help the need to sell scheme?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I will get back to you on how we can offer advice on the scheme.

Question: How can we guarantee we get positive and equitable results for the demolition of our homes?

Answer: We will provide a written answer*

Question: Our house value is going down. How can we resolve this?

Answer: Mayor Tom and Cllr Spice have raised this with EWR already and do not have answers yet.

Question: Anyone who wants to sell means the price has depressed. Need to sell scheme will look at the price based on the sales in the past few years which will be depressed. Have you spoken to EWR about this?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I have met with Beth West and EWR to discuss this but yet to have answers. We will continue to put the case to Beth West that we disagree as well as put resident's cases to EWR too. The Mayor has also met with the Railways Minister.

Question: As and when you sell, EWR said that there is an independent valuator to price the house pre railway proposal and would pay the difference. What is this?

Answer: (Mayor Tom Wootton) I have a feeling the information you were given was not accurate. We will provide a better answer for you*

Question: If there will be 6 tracks, why are they not building the other side of Poets where there is a field?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) Technically they could, but EWR would then have to cross the other four tracks and operationally that is not a good solution.

Question: Can the Central Government push EWR through regardless of local council decisions?

Answer: (Jon Shortland) Yes they can. The planning inspector considers the weight of the arguments presented, not how many arguments there are or who makes them.

*written answers to follow