

East West Rail Meeting

Thursday 12th October, 5:30-7pm

Clapham Village Hall, High Street, Clapham, MK41 6BS

Mayor Tom Wootton – Elected Mayor of Bedford Borough

Craig Austin – Director for Environment (Meeting Chair)

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

Matthew D’Archambaud – Chief Officer for Highways

Jim Weir – Deputy Mayor

Question: Is the route still up for negotiation?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): The route has not yet been determined by EWR so yes, it is still up for negotiation. Bedford Borough Council are currently collecting data and evidence for the statutory consultation, which EWR have said is due to take place in the first half of 2024. Bedford Borough Council has employed SLC, an independent rail consultancy who are reviewing the pros and cons of four routes. We have also employed JBA who are a flood risk consultancy to review the flood risks that EWR have suggested some routes impose. Both of these consultancies should provide Bedford Borough Council with reports by the end of 2023, which can be used as evidence for the statutory consultation. After this process, EWR will need to make a development consent order application which is a planning application to central government. This is expected to happen at the start of 2025 and if approved could lead to construction beginning in 2027. This is the “best case scenario” for EWR and we don’t imagine construction will begin before 2027. We imagine that construction will start in Bletchley in 2027 and so construction will reach the Wyboston area in around 2033. During the statutory consultation, the council will respond and everyone will get a chance to write in and give their opinions.

Question: Where would the route run on the northern option? Would there be a second river crossing?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): If EWR stick with their current plan, the track would be going north out of the station, under Great Ouse Way, over Paula Radcliffe Way and the River Great Ouse, north of Ravensden and across to the A1 north of Roxton.

Question: EWR want the railway to go north and take up countryside which should be left alone. Trains should go from St Johns to Great Barford and then left to St Neots.

Answer: (Tom Wootton): I feel the same as you on this matter. I previously held a meeting in the Poets area and of course they do not want their houses to be knocked down. There are a few southern routes that have not been looked, but we will be looking at these to see if they are feasible. I still need to prove that this isn’t the best route. (Jon Shortland): As previously mentioned,

we have employed railway consultants and they are looking at 4 routes, the 2 routes that EWR have put forward north of Bedford, one route that BFARE have put forward and one that ERTA have put forward. EWR have said that they have looked at BFARE's and ERTA's routes and they have rejected them for several different reasons. For example, they have said that building a new embankment would create a blockage on the River Great Ouse and cause floods which would flood houses in Bedford. They have not yet provided evidence for this so this is one of the things we are looking into. EWR have promised that they will provide us with their data but this is coming in very slowly. We received their flooding data last week and so our flooding consultants are looking into this for us.

Question: Who will have the final say? Will it be the Minister for Transport or the Minister for Rail?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): The Secretary of State for Transport will have the final say, but they may assign this decision to the Minister of Rail.

Question: How much pressure has Richard Fuller put on EWR?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): He has a strong opinion and has put a lot of pressure on the government about this as he too does not want this route. Mr Fuller, BFARE and the Minister of Transport have had a meeting where they walked the length of the track to go over issues.

Question: What economic benefits does this bring to Bedford? People from Cambridge won't come to shop in Bedford and people won't drive to Bedford just to get the train.

Answer: (Jon Shortland): The economic research we have done does show that there will be an economical benefit. (Tom Wootton): I don't believe it will be economically worth it, it doesn't make sense for anyone north of Bedford to use the train and the traffic it creates will be bad.

Question: I am in favour of EWR and I do believe it will have a benefit, I understand why they have gone for the northern route, but what I don't understand is why they need two extra tracks. The tracks are not heavily used. I would like some reassurance that the disruption this creates will be minimised and that all footpaths and foot bridges will be restored. Why are they not electrifying it from day one?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): The council agrees with you that only 4 tracks are required. They are lightly used and the slow lines are not used often, we think there is plenty of room to run the trains. To be fair to EWR, they do want to electrify the trains but the Treasury has told them to cut this out to save money on construction. The Minister has mentioned there may be a possibility for hydrogen and battery trains in the future. They are likely to have diesel trains to start with but hopefully they will move onto electric, hydrogen or battery powered trains. As for the pathways, they will be restoring them all, however they won't necessarily all be put back in the exact same places. When building a new railway, EWR will have to put forward a Construction Management Plan. An independent inspection will take place and EWR will need to provide justification of why these works are necessary before anything can proceed. The council will be asking EWR to pay for staff to deal with the complaints we will have coming in as we don't currently have out of hours staff to be able

to deal with such issues. (Craig Austin): Mr Shortland will fight them that we do not need 6 tracks and we will challenge them on anything they do not have evidence for.

Question: The northern route doesn't make sense, are there powerful interests in the northern route that are undermining opposing evidence? Are there things happening that will benefit from a northern route? Who is it that we need to convince that this is not a good idea?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): There are several landowners along the route that are not likely to benefit from this. The residents of poets have not been offered the right amount of money, and that shows us how the government will deal with landowners. (Jon Shortland): In terms of the local plan, we plan to build houses around the stations, for example at Little Barford, Tempsford and Kempston Hardwick stations. We can't see why anyone would want to build houses beside a railway, they would have to be built around the station to benefit people.

Question: Who is the driving force behind all of this?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): I believe this all started around 25 years ago when a group of councils came together and decided that the east west area connectivity is poor. The councils eventually came up with an idea and they began narrowing down ideas which has finally lead to where we are now. The government has been in favour and has also not been in favour at different times during the long process. The Treasury is in favour at the moment, however the Department of Transport is less keen. Levelling up used to be less keen but they are keener now.

Question: Do we have any understand of freight and passenger travel numbers?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): They plan to have 4 passenger trains an hour between Cambridge and Bedford each way; three each way between Bedford and Bletchley; and four each way between Bletchley and Oxford. With freight trains, they have informed us that they are making space for 1 freight train per hour each way. One thing the government has informed us is that after cancelling HS2 North, they will provide funds for improvement at Ely, which will reduce demand for freight to travel via Bedford to the Midlands. I don't think freight trains are a big issue on this bit of line, however I know that the Mayor does not agree with me on that. When they government announced the budget they made a big thing of life sciences and they are looking for space in Bedford. Trains are not frequently used on a Monday or Friday as people often work from home and EWR will have to factor this into their business case.

Question: Bedford Borough are still in favour of the northern route (route E). Will this go back to full committee for a re vote? Are you in favour of the track going through Bedford?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): We will have a re-vote when he have the evidence to support a different route. The Conservatives do not want the northern route. We don't currently have the majority which is why we need the evidence to change the rest of the councillor's views. This will most likely happen when EWR release their definitive route.

Question: I'm aware we need the evidence, but the council has already spent a lot of tax payer's money on previous reports and evidence that showed us that the northern route will have 12% more economical benefits than the southern route, so will the new evidence show the same?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): We have done research on a previous route that showed that the northern route was more economically beneficial for the town. We are now looking into alternative routes that weren't considered before.

Question: In your quest of gathering evidence, why don't you look at what has changed from the old evidence compared to this new evidence? Travel patterns have changed and this may change eco analysis.

Answer: (Jon Shortland): You are right, we will be looking at this.

Question: The Government proposed a road link from Oxford to Cambridge but this fell through as the business case didn't stack up, what can we take from this to help us?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): I believe this decision was actually pulled because all of the Councils in Oxfordshire didn't want this. We are a small borough and we're not enough to make them change their minds.

Question: Would it be possible to include consideration of a further route going south, similar to the original route B?

Answer: (Jon Shortland): We are already looking at two southern routes, one of which is similar to route B. If we ask our contractors to start looking into a 5th route there will be big delays in getting the evidence back.

Question: On the topic of freight train, my fear is this could mean it is being used to bring material to the incineration plant, so essentially they will bring pollution into Bedford.

Answer: (Tom Wootton): This is a genuine fear as the incineration plant was a large regional project, however we haven't been told anything about this. (Jon Shortland): No, we are not aware of any suggestions that the incinerator could be a factor.

Question: Because of the cancellation of HS2, does this put their project at risk as the government will want to save more money?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): This is a government problem so I don't know, however the government are anxious for good publicity. I think they have spare money that they will put towards EWR. We need to show them that this is not a good place to put the track.

Question: You were elected because of your promises about EWR, so surely the message has to get through to them strongly? We are a small council who probably won't get the most out of this. Don't you think we should accept that it is going to happen and try and make the most out of it?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): I agree, EWR did make the difference in the votes. However I want to challenge the evidence and fight for what is right for this town.

Question: What year are we expecting the train to come through Bedford?

Answer: EWR haven't announced a timetable of their plans but we are estimating that it will be around 2030.

Question: Lots of family owned land will disappear if the line comes this way. If it comes this way then I hope they consider that the viaduct is made substantially lower and that they have a tunnel driven through the land before the carriage drive.

Answer: (Jon Shortland): The Council has submitted an alternative option. We would prefer a lower viaduct and a tunnel.

Question: Will the train hoot when it comes into town?

Answer: It would not be obliged to.

Question: Thank you for promising to gather evidence. Looking at the technical issues, are you looking at broader changes in human behaviour? They must ensure their behaviour assumptions are robust as this is likely to cost more than they have said it will.

Answer: (Jon Shortland): We don't have the capacity to do behavioural studies of that nature, but I agree with you that it will be different to what they have proposed previously. It's been common recently that new trains like these often end up with more passengers than they originally expected.

Question: When we went to the EWR presentation on Manton Lane, we were told that the statutory consultation won't actually change the final decision, is this true?

Answer: (Tom Wootton): A consultation is different to engagement, as they will be telling us information rather than engage with us. (Jon Shortland): The purpose of a statutory consultation is that they take on residents views. EWR will not be acting as their own judge and jury, they will need to convince an independent inspector and they will make the decision. (Craig Austin): this is why it's important that we make our points.

Question: After you've gathered all this new evidence, will you continue to be transparent?

Answer: (Craig Austin): Absolutely.

Question: I think we need more of this type of engagement and it would be useful if EWR engaged with us more.

Answer: (Tom Wootton): We will be back with more evidence when we've gathered it, probably sometime next year. I don't know if we will win this fight, but we will use all our power to fight it.