

RAIL EAST

The Newsletter of the East Anglian Branch of RailFuture

Number 119

May 2003

Price 40p

Greater Anglia franchise starts in controversy

The process to find the operator for the new Greater Anglia Franchise started in controversy when the Strategic Rail Authority did not include First Group among the short listed bidders. First Group, who currently operate the Great Eastern Franchise, were expected to be included in the bidders as they have done a good job in running a reliable service and keeping to their original funding plans. The company had also spent a lot of effort in talking to rail users about their aspirations for the new franchise. The matter was widely reported in the local and national press and the Branch and other rail user groups wrote to the SRA asking them to reconsider their position. First Group say that they have received hundreds of letters of support from commuters. The SRA response was that First Group had put in a poor submission to the pre-qualification questions and were therefore excluded from the formal bidding. The successful companies that made it onto the tender list are GB Railways, National Express and Arriva.

In mid April, the SRA posted on their web-site some of the basic specification documents that the bidders have to comply with. Included in the requirements for the bidders to consider are:

- 10 year franchise with last 3 years subject to meeting performance criteria
- All stations between Whittlesea and Wymondham to be taken over by the new franchisee.
- Class 90s and existing stock for the London-Norwich service - i.e. no new trains;
- Station improvements
- Improved transport Integration
- Enhanced local services but for no additional money
- A separate business unit for the rural routes

Unfortunately details of the new quality standards for stations and the draft timetable for 2004 were not included. The Branch has asked the SRA for copies.

The item in the document that causes alarm is "... cost reduction measures ... bus alternatives at times of weak demand". Figures released at the Norfolk and Suffolk County Rail Policy Group meetings suggest that passengers on these rural routes grew between 7-15% last year indicating that the level of service is about right. We have to remember the lessons from the Beeching era of the 1960s when only 20% of previous rail users transferred to buses when the lines closed. The recent withdrawal of through buses between Ipswich and Lowestoft because most passengers preferred to take the train, and the short term operation of long distance bus routes out of Cambridge shows that things have not changed. Clearly this is a worrying move by the SRA and there will be a discussion at our Ipswich meeting on 7th June to agree what action we should take.

Branch meeting in Ipswich - Saturday 7th June

The next Branch meeting is on Saturday 7th June at the County Library in Ipswich. The special guest will be Tim Robinson, who is the newly appointed Commercial Director of GB Railfreight. It will be at the earlier time of 10.30 am, allowing members the chance to buy an Anglia Plus ticket and then travel by train to Lowestoft, Felixstowe or elsewhere after the meeting, which will end by 1 pm. The meeting will be held in the large room upstairs on the first floor using the entrance on Old Foundry Road rather than the main Library entrance in Northgate Street. The Branch committee will meet in the afternoon and any suggestions for Branch activities should be sent to Nick Dibben.

Freight developments

Norfolk County Council is reviewing its strategy on Railfreight. The County adopted a formal strategy in 1998 that included identifying and protecting sites for future freight sidings. Although the County does not operate freight services, it considered it had a role in bringing various businesses together to encourage more freight to travel by rail and has had some successes. The County wants to consider ways to help set up new inter-modal freight terminals that will allow short term rail flows to operate successfully. Suggested sites include Hethersett near the A11 and at Great Yarmouth adjacent to the A47.

GB Railfreight is proposing to build a major rail freight depot and warehouse (plus other buildings and offices) next to the A1120 at Creeting St Peter, near Stowmarket, which could create 350 full-time and 150 part-time jobs. The site is being looked at owing to a shortage of land near the dockside at the Felixstowe. GB Railfreight Ltd says that a substantial rail connected depot close to the port would allow containers to be swiftly removed from the congested dockside and roads, creating somewhere for them to be prepared for onward transit. A formal planning application has been made to Mid-Suffolk District Council.

The SRA has confirmed that its preferred route for freight between Felixstowe and the West Coast main Line is via London. To allow for larger containers to be carried on standard railway wagons work will be carried out at Ipswich station tunnel in 2004, which will require closing the line for 8 weeks. A further consequence of using this route is that the number of off-peak passenger trains to Liverpool Street may have to be reduced. The Branch has written to the SRA suggesting that the line between Ipswich and Peterborough should still be upgraded to allow for more freight between Felixstowe and the North East.

March Yard to re-open

Network Rail have announced plans to re-open part of March Yard for use as a maintenance depot for track repairs. Network Rail will have to close their Temple Mills logistics distribution centre in East London during 2004, as the site will be used for servicing Eurostars. They have looked at three replacement sites in East Anglia (which included Chesterton Sidings in Cambridge) and have chosen the Whitemoor Yard in March for their new "virtual quarry" plus locomotive depot, and possibly a concrete sleeper manufacturing site relocated from Tallington alongside the ECML. There could be

200-250 new jobs created.

Network Rail require planning permission, and have staged an exhibition in March to identify any local concerns about noise for nearby residents. Landscaping and noise barriers would be built to reduce the effects of the work, although plans for a country park in the yard area would no longer be possible. Network Rail said there were no plans to reopen the Wisbech line, but the track would definitely not be lifted. The drawings on show implied that the branch would not be severed. By chance, a track worker attended one of the exhibitions, and revealed that he walked the Wisbech line once a month

to ensure that rail was not stolen (like the Leamside line) and cars were not dumped on it. The Wisbech line, throughout its length, is still in remarkably good condition, with little vegetation on the track

Snippets...

Snippets is an e-mail newsletter for members of the East Anglia Branch of Railfuture. To receive a copy, please send an e-mail to jerry.alderson@virgin.net asking to be added to the list. Remember to let Jerry needs to know if you have changed your e-mail address or you will not receive a copy.

Thameslink 2000

The government has refused to give the go-ahead for part of the Thameslink 2000 project. In the Inspector's report on the public inquiry, although the concept of the project was endorsed, concerns were raised about some of the architectural features of the new London Bridge station. The Inspector therefore felt that full approval of the scheme could not be given. Network Rail and the SRA put forward a compromise proposal suggesting that the Government should allow some of the basic railway work to progress whilst the details of London Bridge station were resolved. The key benefit of this approach was to enable the work for the new Thameslink station under St Pancras and connecting tracks to be co-ordinated with the work being done on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL). Not doing the work now will add perhaps £150m to the cost as the work will be much more difficult once the CTRL is built. The Branch, Local Authorities and many other rail user groups wrote in to support this approach. However, no approval was given.

Once the station issues have been resolved, it appears that the public inquiry process will have to be carried out again, costing many millions of pounds. The new completion date is around 2011. The additional costs caused by this delay have caused some people to question if the project will ever happen or if forced cost savings will mean that Thameslink services running onto the Kings Cross route may be omitted.

Given the delays to the scheme, the Branch has written to the SRA asking that some short term improvements be made to Great Northern services out of Kings Cross. We have suggested additional rolling stock to ease peak hour over crowding, better information systems and improved disabled access to stations such as St Neots.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 31st May - Railfuture National Annual General Meeting in Cardiff.

Saturday 7th June - Branch meeting in Ipswich Central Library starting at 10.30. The speaker will be Tim Robinson from GB Railfreight.

Saturday 20th September - Branch meeting in Norwich (to be confirmed)

Saturday 22nd November - Branch meeting in Cambridge

The National Rail Users' Conference will take place in London one Saturday in October. Railfuture have invited a Government Minister and senior SRA staff to attend. More details will be in the next Railwatch.

From here & there

Anglia Railways is to add two extra evening return trips on the **Bittern Line** thanks to a £110,000 grant from Norfolk County Council, East of England Development Agency and the local Community Rail Partnership. The new services are designed to tackle social exclusion and to encourage tourism in the area.

Anglia Plus tickets are now valid on WAGN services between Ely and Cambridge

Great Eastern has had to delay the entry into service of the **Class 360 trains** as the testing programme has not yet been completed.

Bury St Edmunds station improvements

A £400,000 package of improvements to Bury St Edmunds station has been agreed. The money will be used to improve the station forecourt, improve interchange with buses and taxis and provide passenger operated lifts. The SRA is contributing £233,000, with £100,000 from Suffolk County Council and £40,000 for St Edmundsbury Council.

The Branch welcomes contributions to Rail East. Short articles are particularly welcome. Material for the next edition should reach Nick Dibben by 15th August 2003.

Spot the difference

It is not just the cost of railway schemes that appear to spiral out of control. When the Cambridge to Huntingdon Multi-modal study (CHUMMS) recommended adding a lane to the A14 the cost was put at £192m. The Highways Agency has just carried out some design development work of the scheme and the cost has increased to £490m! That's £300m extra or an increase of 155% in just 18 months. The Government appears unconcerned about this massive increase and has given outline approval for the road to be taken to planning stage. This is the same Government that says there is no money for new railway projects and has actually cut the money given to the railways by around £300m over the next 2 years.

The A47 Multi-modal Study between Peterborough and Norwich has put forward a rather modest list of proposals. Apart from a few station improvements, there are no rail schemes. The Branch has commented on this lack of vision.

At the other extreme, the **London to South Midlands study** has put forward a large list of both rail and road improvements. Interestingly, this study notes that although billions of pounds is being proposed on building new roads and adding lanes to existing motorways, they do not expect these "improvements" to lead to a reduction traffic congestion. In our comments on this study, the Branch has noted that this approach can not be described as a sustainable transport policy and again expressed concerned that money for the proposed rail schemes may not be made available.

The House of Commons Transport Select Committee has just issued a report on Multi-modal studies having taken evidence for many organisations including Railfuture. The report concluded that these studies were generally worthwhile but it expressed concerns about the lack of co-ordination between the delivery of road and rail schemes. The above examples highlight the problem only too well.

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Chesterton proposal

Cambridgeshire County Council's new draft Local Transport Plan includes the construction of a new Interchange at Chesterton. The SRA has also formally asked Greater Anglia Franchise bidders to take account of the station in their proposals.

Alan Browning, rail development manager for the county council, has expressed the hope that Network Rail will make a contribution to the funding and the County Council will be making a bid to the Government for funds. The council have only undertaken a preliminary feasibility study at the moment. It showed a high benefit-to-cost ratio. The station would be built on the existing sidings and the current freight facility will need to be reorganised. Work on the interchange could start in 2004 with the first services operating in 2007.

Nick spreads the news

Branch Secretary Nick Dibben has given a talk to the Sandy Transport Society on the East-West Rail Link. The Branch is keen to give talks or lead a discussion about the current situation on our regions' railways to other organisations. So if you are a member, or know someone who belongs to, a local political or social organisation such as the WI who is looking for speakers please contact Nick Dibben.