

# **AIRDRIE-BATHGATE RAILWAY AND LINKED IMPROVEMENTS BILL COMMITTEE**

Monday 18 September 2006

Session 2

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## **AIRDRIE-BATHGATE RAILWAY AND LINKED IMPROVEMENTS BILL COMMITTEE 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2006, Session 2**

### **CONVENER**

\*Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con)

### **DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP)

### **COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)

\*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

\*Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

\*attended

### **THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:**

John Baggaley (MVA Consultancy)

Jim Connelly (Network Rail)

Donna Festorazzi (Network Rail)

John Halliday (Strathclyde Partnership for Transport)

Tom Hart (Scottish Association for Public Transport)

Trond Haugen (South-East Scotland Transport Partnership)

Councillor Russell Imrie (South-East Scotland Transport Partnership)

Scott Leitham (MVA Consultancy)

Graham Mackay (North Lanarkshire Council)

Alan Macmillan (Network Rail)

Joe Magee (Jacobs Babbie)

Graeme Malcolm (West Lothian Council)

Hazel Martin (Strathclyde Partnership for Transport)

Ron McAulay (Network Rail)

David McDove (North Lanarkshire Council)

Roy Mitchell (West Lothian Council)

Steve Montgomery (First ScotRail)

Gerard O'Hanlon (First ScotRail)

Robert Samson (Passenger Focus)

Hugh Wark (Network Rail)

### **CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Fergus Cochrane

### **LOCATION**

Best Western Hilcroft Hotel, Whitburn



## Scottish Parliament

### Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee

*Monday 18 September 2006*

[The CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:33*]

### Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill: Preliminary Stage

**The Convener (Phil Gallie):** Good morning, everyone. I formally open the fourth meeting in 2006 of the Airdrie-Bathgate Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee. This is our third oral evidence-taking meeting. We have full committee member attendance again—to date, we have had 100 per cent attendance.

Following the first meeting of a parliamentary committee in Airdrie last week, this is the first time that a parliamentary committee has held a meeting in the Whitburn and Bathgate area. We are delighted to be in these comfortable surroundings. We had a little problem with the lights this morning, so I am grateful to the individual who sorted it out for us. I also thank the rest of the hotel staff for their assistance in enabling us to hold the meeting here in the Strathearn suite.

The purpose of today's meeting is for the committee to continue its consideration of the general principles of the bill—in other words, to consider the need for the railway. Specifically, we will hear evidence from the promoter and a range of other witnesses about accessibility and railway integration with other modes of public transport, patronage forecasting, project costs and risk management.

We are grateful to everyone who responded to our request for written evidence. The site visit that we undertook along the route of the proposed railway helped to broaden our understanding of the issues surrounding the railway and the general location of the track, stations and some of the properties that are close by.

We hope to break for lunch at about 12.30 pm. Members of the public are, of course, welcome to leave the meeting at any time, but I ask them to do so quietly. Although the meeting is being held in public, it is not a public meeting; it is the formal work of the Parliament, therefore I would appreciate the public's co-operation in ensuring that today's business is properly conducted.

The three whole-bill objectors have withdrawn the whole-bill element of their objections. Therefore we will not hear oral evidence from the two witnesses in panel five. However, we still have a full agenda. We will ask succinct questions and we expect succinct answers.

I ask everyone to ensure that all mobile phones, pagers and so on are switched off.

The first panel was to have been the witnesses from south-east Scotland transport partnership, but they have had a technical hitch. I am grateful to Mr Samson from Passenger Focus and Mr Hart from the Scottish Association for Public Transport for taking their place. I understand that Dr John McCormick, who was also due to give evidence, is unable to join us.

**Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab):** Good morning. Will the railway noticeably reduce road congestion? If so, how?

**Tom Hart (Scottish Association for Public Transport):** It depends what you mean by noticeably. With big projects, it takes some time for the full results to become apparent. A lot of people are unaware that, last year, total road traffic in Scotland—certainly car traffic—did not increase at all, although it rose on some routes. A lot of our members have cars and they want more opportunities to transfer easily to improved public transport. They want more capacity on the trains, better car parking, bus feeders and improved services.

The M8 corridor has congestion problems, which tend to be more acute on the approaches to Glasgow and Edinburgh and the routes through those cities. We are convinced that, as part of a Scottish transport strategy, the Airdrie to Bathgate railway project will contribute to a reduction in the growth of car traffic on those corridors, where there is still growth, particularly at peak periods. For several years, we have emphasised that the problem has got worse at peak times mainly because there is still a large number of single-occupant cars. If we can persuade more of those people to shift to public transport and persuade some of them to car share, we will not need to spend money on major road projects in the way that we have in the past. We will be able to move to more sustainable, inclusive transport, which will also help the economy. We definitely see a role for the railway project in that.

There is a more controversial area, which deserves further study. To get a greater degree of shift, it is desirable to consider new forms of road pricing in central Scotland. It might be possible to do that more quickly than was thought even last year, because Douglas Alexander has been talking about a bill, which could apply in Scotland, to allow authorities in pilot areas to consider local

road pricing at peak times. Such pricing would produce some funding and would also result in a better playing field when people are deciding whether to use a car or public transport. We should bear it in mind that people in Scotland—and in Britain—have been quite used to peak surcharges for rail travel, particularly on the Edinburgh to Glasgow route. Local road pricing would encourage a greater shift to public transport at those crucial periods. However, we recognise that the issue is debatable and does not involve the bill.

**Robert Samson (Passenger Focus):** We support the Scottish Association for Public Transport's comments. Many factors encourage modal transfer from car to train, one of which is park-and-ride facilities at train stations. We carry out a national passenger survey twice a year. Our latest results show that only 53 per cent of passengers who use Scotland's rail network are satisfied with current park-and-ride provision, so such provision is an essential element of the proposals. Indeed, where possible, the number of available spaces at all station park-and-ride facilities should be increased and their security should be improved, so that passengers will be satisfied that their cars will be safe where they leave them and will be in one piece when they return. Many factors, including journey times, attract people to change their mode of transport.

**Janis Hughes:** Are the park-and-ride proposals adequate? Are you happy with the number of car parking places at each proposed station?

**Robert Samson:** We are satisfied with the proposals for most of the proposed stations. We know that more than 300 spaces have been identified for Drumgelloch, for example, but we are concerned about the provision at Airdrie station, where it is proposed to increase the number of spaces from 150 to 166. Currently, the car park at Airdrie fills up—the Scottish planning assessment showed that all the spaces are taken during the morning peak. There might be transfer from Airdrie to Drumgelloch, but people might not drive up to Drumgelloch—they might simply drive all the way to their destination. The limited car parking at Airdrie station is therefore one of our major concerns.

**Tom Hart:** We agree that a significant increase in car parking spaces is needed, particularly at stations with the most frequent services. Network Rail has produced a route utilisation strategy for Scotland—on which there will be consultation until the middle of November—which identifies a car parking issue. Several sites are now badly congested. I know that if I want to catch a train and get into a particular car park after 9 o'clock, it will be full. People park in surrounding streets, which annoys residents and might put people off

parking altogether. Network Rail has suggested that, as well as considering multistorey car parking, which is expensive, people could consider peak pricing in car parks as part of packages.

There is another issue that members might have questions about. We suggest in our evidence that the bill tends to be preoccupied with providing extra parking spaces. However, one of the Executive's policy objectives is to improve social access. We are talking about an area in which a substantial number of people do not have access to a car or they live in households with only one car that one occupant drives away early, so other people in the household do not, in effect, have a car. In our evidence, we argue that it is important to organise good bus links to the stations from the day the line opens.

**Janis Hughes:** You have pre-empted my next question. I was going to ask whether the scheme will maximise for local communities the potential that exists for good integration of different forms of transport.

**Tom Hart:** I must reply no to that, partly because legal difficulties are involved in rearranging bus services, although those difficulties are not insuperable. Indeed, the Executive is currently considering the issue as part of the national transport strategy. However, there have been too many examples of people taking the easy route of expanding station car parks while forgetting the real problems that face people who do not have a car.

I live in a town of about 7,000 people in Ayrshire, about 2 miles from a station. In the evening, many people run down to the station to pick people up, because the bus service is so infrequent. Others have to pay for taxis in addition to the cost of their journey. There is a real issue, which we would like you to mention in your final report on the bill, so that it can be addressed before the trains start operating. An amendment to the bill is not required, but action in other areas is required.

10:45

**Robert Samson:** We recognise the legal difficulties with integrating bus and rail, but there should be a one-ticket solution on this line. There should be initiatives such as one timetable for the bus and rail and some facility whereby if a train is delayed for five minutes, the passengers do not get off the train only to see the bus leaving the car park, which happens in many places in Scotland just now. There has to be good walking access to stations and provision for cyclists—even though they might be only 1 or 2 per cent of passengers—such as storage lockers and cycle paths, as well as well-lit walkways, which will cater for

passengers whichever way they access the stations.

**Tom Hart:** I want to add a point about what integration means in practice. You are talking about integrating rail with other modes of transport, but in our evidence we draw to your attention the problem in the Monklands area, particularly in Coatbridge, where two rail lines cross but there is no physical interchange between them. We are not saying that the bill should be delayed until that is sorted out, but nothing should be done that would prejudice the creation of a good interchange between rail and rail in the Coatbridge area, as well as interchange with bus connections. That is an important issue, because integration applies within rail as well as between rail and other modes.

Our other concern is the possible impact of the extended policy for free bus travel for those aged over 60 and the disabled, which now applies everywhere in Scotland. Many people are looking for free local travel, which they do not have on rail. Has the extent to which the extension of free bus travel might reduce the potential usage of the Airdrie to Bathgate line been assessed? We would like the committee to recommend that the Government considers bringing certain rail services within the scope of the free travel scheme, as part of an integrated approach.

**The Convener:** On peak-time pricing, you suggest that there are arguments—which do not fall within the remit of the committee—in relation to peak-time travel on the roads. You also refer to peak-time travel on the railway. You say that perhaps there could be peak prices in the car parks. Given that some people have no choice about when they travel, and that we are trying to get people from cars on to rail, would peak prices in car parks not be detrimental?

**Tom Hart:** It depends on the package. If there were also peak pricing on road travel, I suspect that some people would prefer to use the car park, which would be cheaper to them overall. The other issue is fairness for those who do not have a car, who often have greater problems accessing work.

**The Convener:** I accept that, but I was asking specifically about car parking. We are trying to get people to come to railway stations to join the train. Would higher car park prices not be detrimental?

**Tom Hart:** On their own, with no change in road pricing, they would deter some people, but they might also make them shift to another car park that is not as congested and could be expanded more easily. It would not necessarily shift them back to using their car for the whole trip.

**Robert Samson:** Mr Hart referred to Network Rail's route utilisation strategy, which is out for consultation. One of its options for consideration is

car parking charges. As part of our response to that consultation, we are carrying out research with passengers who use the park-and-ride facilities, to test their sensitivity to car parking charges. We are concerned that if the charges are set at a high level, that might have the negative effect of taking people away from the rail network. That still has to be borne out by the evidence, but we will respond to Network Rail's consultation with the survey results.

**Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab):** What advantages does the proposed railway offer that improved bus services do not in increasing wider access to job markets, increasing inward investment and improving local economic performance? Would a better bus service not be able to deal with those issues?

**Tom Hart:** Better bus services are as yet nowhere near offering the journey times that rail can offer, particularly for people who are within easy walking distance of a station or who can take their car and park there. That is one of the problems with buses, and those problems get worse in Glasgow and Edinburgh, where a lot of the job opportunities are.

There are busways in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but they still do not give the travel times that rail or, for that matter, the proposed tram in Edinburgh can give. That is a difficulty for buses. Bus services on the M8 could be improved and some of them could be allowed to make detours so that there is not just a Glasgow to Edinburgh express bus. West Lothian Council has considered that in the past. We are certainly not saying that there are no opportunities to help some people by improving the bus service.

I have been part of the central Scotland transport corridor study group, which continues under the name of DIG—the delivery issues group—a sub-group of which has been considering bus services. It is a pity that the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK was not able to come along today. The sub-group was involved with considering extended car parking at some points on the M8, where people could park their cars and move to the bus. However, that also involved the issue of connecting buses, where someone could get a local bus that had a guaranteed link to the express bus, in the same way as with trains.

There is the question of whether the buses could be allowed to run on the hard shoulder to help their journey times, but there have been long delays in getting any decision on that. There is a range of issues that do not affect a segregated railway.

The Scottish Association for Public Transport wants to see combinations of rail and bus with

easy walking and cycling access. The total package must be examined. If attention is not paid to the package, there could be problems for people living in, for example, the Monklands area or the east side of Glasgow, who see work opportunities in Livingston that are not beside any of the present railway stations. It is critical that if we get the Airdrie to Bathgate service running—I hope that it is running a year earlier than the present target, rather than later—we provide good connections between Bathgate or Armadale and the employment centres. I am sure that people would use a guaranteed good link, especially if the ticketing did not involve a penalty compared with using a through bus. Robert Samson emphasised the point about through-ticketing.

**Cathy Peattie:** In answer to earlier questions, you spoke about access. What would you like the promoter to do to improve and encourage sustainable access to stations for passengers?

**Tom Hart:** There is mention of walking and cycle access, but our impression is that much more money is being allocated to improve the car parks. You might argue that we could expect contributions from councils or the new regional transport partnerships to improve the overall package.

There is a need to find more funding for improved bus feeder services, which might also be a question of partnership. A subsidised service could come into conflict with an existing one that is not subsidised. That is one of the issues that are being considered in the Scottish transport strategy, and it is also being considered on a UK basis.

**Cathy Peattie:** Given your answer, would you support additional stations at Plains and Blackridge?

**Tom Hart:** Our evidence focuses on the need for good connections to the proposed new stations and the relocated ones. We discussed that again in our committee, and we recognise that, particularly if it is difficult to develop the kind of bus feeders that are wanted, if there is a community right on the railway there might be a case for providing a halt there. That would have timetable implications. Early in our evidence, we say that we hope that the committee procedure can be completed more quickly than was originally intended, so that the project can move to contracts more quickly, the work can be done and the railway can open a year earlier. That would give the greatest benefit. After that, there is the Transport and Works (Scotland) Bill, which should make it easier to consider whether to add an extra halt and where such a halt would be justified.

I came by car this morning, because it would have been difficult to get here on time from

Ayrshire any other way. I came along the old route from Airdrie and passed through Blackridge. There is an opportunity for a halt, but we should get the line up and consider the possibilities after that. A halt would be better than having a bus feeder for people who live along the route.

**Cathy Peattie:** If stations are not placed in Plains and Blackridge at the start, might it not be more difficult to argue for them in the future?

**Tom Hart:** I do not think so. On the Ayrshire line from Glasgow, which is the one I normally use, a number of stations were shut after the Beeching report, but most of them are being reopened, albeit slightly relocated. One that opened recently is Howwood, which opened in association with some housing expansion—although not a huge amount of new housing—as a contribution from the housing developer. Unfortunately, because of track capacity constraints, Howwood has only an hourly service for most of the day which, although there is a car park at the station, means that some people take their cars to Johnstone station, which is badly overcrowded. It is a matter of going ahead at maximum speed to get the project up and running. Within two or three years there will be the possibility of adding more halts, which could be influenced by land-use plans and where housing is most wanted.

**Robert Samson:** My local station in Lanarkshire is Shieldmuir, which Strathclyde Passenger Transport reopened a few years ago. The number of stations that have been reopened is into double figures, so it would be possible, once the line has been built, to have stations at Plains and Blackridge. The difficulty is that passenger numbers at Blackridge in particular are quite significant—in excess of 50,000 a year. That has to be balanced against what the design appraisal work says and whether the increase in journey time would have a negative impact and reduce overall passenger numbers. That would have to be considered carefully to determine the impact.

A balanced judgment has to be reached. We would like stations at Blackridge and Plains, but what delay would they cause to the project? What additional cost would they involve? What land acquisition and public consultation would they involve? I would have liked to be in a position to say that it is great that four new stations are being opened, but there are only two. I do not know whether the project budget will allow for an increase in the number of stations, but I recognise the difficulty for Blackridge and Plains, which will have all the pain of the line being built and will see trains hurtling by their windows but will have none of the gain. There are difficult decisions to be reached in relation to the overall budget and the increased time that extra stations might add to the project.

**Cathy Peattie:** If the plan goes ahead with a view to opening the additional stations that people are arguing for at Blackridge and Plains in the future, will it mean that those stations will never be opened?

**Robert Samson:** Over the years, we have been contacted by a number of organisations that want stations in their local communities, some of which have been successful. Such stations have to go through the Scottish transport appraisal guidance process. We know that Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, which is giving evidence later today, has aspirations for a number of additional stations. With public support and with the support of the local authority, regional transport partnerships and train operators, such stations are possible.

I do not rule out the possibility of stations at Blackridge and Plains post-completion of the project. I would rather have been here today with all the stations in place, but we are not in that situation. I am trying not to sit on the fence when I say that, although we see the need for both stations, we are concerned about the overall impact that any delay would have on the project costs.

11:00

**Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP):** Will the promoter's passenger forecasts be reasonably accurate? Will the pattern of services and stops that is suggested be attractive to the people who are expected to use the proposed railway?

**Robert Samson:** Experience has shown—particularly since the recent reopening of Bathgate and Larkhall stations—that patronage forecasts tend to be on the negative side. Larkhall is a success story with patronage of 34 per cent above the forecast. Services every 15 minutes on the proposed line should meet the needs of most passengers who transfer between the two cities and there will be a 30-minute service at other stations, as well as parking.

We are concerned about the western route from Airdrie and Drumgelloch into Glasgow. Many new passengers will travel from Bathgate to Glasgow and we know that services from Airdrie to Glasgow are busy during the morning peak. We wonder whether the rolling stock—the class 334s, which are the base case—will be sufficient. The class 320s that run the route currently have about 20 per cent more capacity than the 334s. Is a six-car formation big enough or should it be increased to seven, eight or nine cars? We also have concerns about potential overcrowding on evening trains from Glasgow Queen Street to Armadale, Airdrie and Drumgelloch.

**Tom Hart:** It is important to have a range of forecasts, because they are influenced by the assumptions that one makes about road pricing, for example, and whether there are a lot of new developments in the surrounding areas. We are confident that use of the proposed line would range from good to very good.

That leads us on to the question whether existing passengers on other routes would be affected by worse overcrowding, because the trains would run on to those routes at both ends of the line. The forecast ties in with thinking about train capacity and reliability. We might need to consider using longer or additional trains from Airdrie into Glasgow, a route that could create a greater overcrowding problem. We must also remember the Executive's target, which is that no one should be forced to stand for more than 10 minutes, although it has not set a date by which that target should be achieved. We think that it is overambitious because when people travel shorter distances, we often find that they are happy to stand even when seats are available. Rolling stock can be designed to have good standing room. We certainly do not want people to have to stand regularly for more than 15 minutes, which is a bit of a relaxation of the Scottish Executive target. Our figure, together with a 2010 delivery date, is more realistic.

Rail passenger growth in Scotland has been much higher in the past five years than road traffic growth. That brings nearer problems of overcrowding and capacity pinch points that we need to address or we will not be able to accommodate the forecasts that we would like. This month's *Modern Railways* magazine has an article—I was unable to make photocopies of it—on Transport Scotland's plans for improving rolling stock capacity and introducing longer trains. The article says that we can expect fairly imminent decisions from Transport Scotland on how to expand capacity. That needs to be tied in with new lines coming on stream and with the evidence on the growth in usage of existing lines. We badly need orders for more rolling stock because it is at least three years before it is delivered. That article is in the September issue of *Modern Railways*, a photocopy of which I can provide for the committee.

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