

Angela Foster

OR3/670

From: Simon Fathers
Sent: 28 May 2018 10:57
To: TRANSPORTANDWORKSACT
Subject: Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) order

Dear Secretary of State for Transport

Please find below my objection and concerns for the proposed Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) order.

Yours Sincerely,

Simon Fathers

Dear Secretary of State for Transport

RE: Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) Order

I am writing to you to raise my objections and concerns with regards the Rother Valley Railway (Bodiam to Robertsbridge Junction) order.

Having viewed the online application submitted to Rother District Council by the Rother Valley Railway (RVR) Ltd. I am concerned at the lack of upto date information with regards traffic surveys and environmental impact analysis. Much of the data used is either out of date (2010 traffic counts) or based assumptions (Environment Statement) having not had access to the land affected in question. I feel that there is inadequate data/analysis with regards the potential impact on the local area for residents with regards parking, pollution (noise/air quality), flood risk and tangible economic benefits.

My main areas of concern having read the application are:

- Level crossings
- Environmental impact
- Flood risk

- Parking
- Compulsory purchase order

Level crossing A21 and C18 Northbridge Street

The A21 is the main road between the M25 and the South Coast providing a key strategic route linking Hastings, Bexhill, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge and has been recognised as vital to coastal regeneration around Hastings. Major road improvements have recently been completed in the form of a dual carriageway on the Pembury section and significant cost to the natural landscape to reduce journey times and equally the Hastings to Bexhill bypass has been completed with the aim of reducing journey times and increase generation in the area. Both these road schemes have been at a high cost to the taxpayer and the environment but were deemed to be of significant national economic importance. Accepting that these schemes bring economic benefits to the area I am greatly concerned to see that the proposed railway crossing will in effect reduce these benefits by increasing journey times and thus not be inline with the wider A21 improvement/national regeneration strategy.

Having used the A21 on a daily basis for many years I am also concerned that there is a real risk that drivers may use the village as a cut through route to avoid potential traffic queues when the railway crossing barriers are down. It would be very easy if heading north from Hastings to turn off into the village to cut through to join the A21 again at the roundabout and equally if heading south turn off at the roundabout and rejoin the A21 again at the top of the village. This would mean that the original purpose of the A21 as a bypass round the village of Robertsbridge would be less effective in reducing the amount of traffic in the village. Periods where there has been a road traffic incident along this stretch of the A21 already indicates that this is the natural decision drivers will make if felt that there journeys are being impeded.

Equally traffic impeded at the A21 roundabout often chooses to turn down Church Lane to Salehurst which is meant to be a quiet rural lane used to reach the Parish Church and/or public house. This lane has been highlighted as a potential 'quiet lane' through the Parish Plan with the aim of reducing traffic and making it safer for non vehicle users. My concern is that decisions made by drivers impeded by the crossing will be to use this lane as an alternative route.

Northbridge Street forms part of the main route through the village. It is a popular school route to the village primary and secondary schools both for vehicles and on foot. I am concerned that increases in traffic caused by vehicles trying to avoid a closed crossing on the A21 will increase the risk and noise levels to local residents living and using this stretch. The application does not also make it clear if this crossing will be closed at the same time as the A21 crossing resulting in a period of grid lock for vehicles.

The Parish local plan has indicated that the village will need to increase its housing capacity within the parish. One such site identified in the plan is the old mill site which is next to this crossing and Grove Farm which is at the top of the high street. These developments will naturally lead to increase in the number of vehicles in the village and accessing the A21 so I am also concerned that a crossing would lead to more congestion in the village which has not been properly addressed in the RVR application.

Environmental Impact

I am concerned that the Environmental Statement included within the application does not contain a good level of detail on which to base a decision. The statement mainly just states what international and national policy there is in relation to the environment and then makes assumptions based on no site specific data. Both the AONB High Weald Unit and Sussex Wildlife Trust have also highlighted this in their comments with regards being consulted on the application and request further information before making further comment.

With regards the area being designated as being within the AONB I am also concerned that the creation of a solid linear structure in the form of a rail track and supporting infrastructure will have a detrimental impact on wildlife. This will create a further physical barrier with regards movement of wildlife (taking into account there is already the busy A21 nearby) as well as a noise and vibration barrier to wildlife in the valley. There does not seem to be any mitigation of note contained within the application on how the RVR will look to reduce and monitor this impact. There is also no data with regards habitat loss and how this would be fully mitigated outside putting up a few nest boxes for monitoring. I have observed the valley being a habitat for a range of wildlife including barn owls, badgers, hedgehogs, newts, butterflies and cuckoo to name a few so any change to the land on this scale will have a real impact.

As well as wildlife there will also be an impact on the wellbeing of humans. I live in a house that overlooks the fields where the proposed line is to be built between the A21 and Salehurst. This is currently open farmland with some road scheme planting along side the A21 to try and reduce traffic noise. I am concerned that without any thought being given to how noise levels will be reduced along the valley stretch this will have a detrimental effect on my quality of life and those of my neighbours. I accept the traffic noise from the A21 bypass as this was a nationally important economic infrastructure improvement and benefited the wider village community but fail to see why there needs to be further noise pollution added to this because a small group of people who have an interest in trains who want to install a railway track for 'pleasure'.

Again, why add further air pollution to current levels caused by the A21? The government says it is committed to reducing CO2 levels so why support a transport proposal that relies heavily on fossil fuels? The area will only have a certain level of carrying capacity with regards infrastructure (housing, roads, facilities for the community etc.) before having an irreversible unsustainable impact on the environment so why reduce this capacity by approving a proposal that does not benefit the wider community? The focus going forward should be the neighbourhood plan objectives which focuses on important economic infrastructure improvements (housing) and protecting our heritage buildings and green spaces for all not a scheme that would only benefit only a minority yet have a negative impact on many residents

Flood Risk

Whilst I accept that I am not an expert with regards engineering and flood risk management I am concerned what impact installing a railway track and accompanying infrastructure will have on the level of risk from flood water. As residents are very much aware, the Robertsbridge area is susceptible to flooding from the River Rother and in the past this has had a real impact on the lives of local people. The Environment Agency has worked hard (and at considerable cost) to try and reduce this risk so I am now concerned that by installing a solid liner structure along the valley next to the river will only increase the levels of risk again. I understand that RVR will work closely with the EA to try to design a scheme to minimise impact but again there seems to be a general level of assumption in the application on the potential impact using the 100 year calculation. Again, why create something that

is not of local/regional/national importance yet potentially could have a real negative impact on the lives of local people and put further strain on government agencies?

Having looked at the designs submitted by the RVR I am equally concern with regards the visual impact any flood risk mitigation works will have. To ensure the track bed is not susceptible to the seasonal flooding of this land it will need to be raised on an embankment. This will need to be quite a considerable structure in height to be able to cross the valley floor from Northbridge Street up to the proposed A21 crossing point and continue along the valley alongside the river to link with Bodiam. The scale of this embankment can already be seen along the Bodiam section where it towers above the fields either side. This is not something I would like to view everyday from the front of my house and feel that it would have a negative visual impact on the landscape which is part of the High Weald AONB.

Parking

I am concerned that the application provides very little information/data with regards the impact the scheme would have on parking in the village and surrounding area. There also seems to be no plans to improve parking and an assumption that most visitors will come to the village via the main rail line to use the railway.

As Robertsbridge will become the start/end of the line for the rail track I find it hard to understand that RVR feel that the higher percentage of users would not come by car to the village. This would then allow them to travel towards Bodiam, as an attractive destination where there is little parking opportunities, or further along the line before a return journey to Robertsbridge. The catchment area for Robertsbridge being a starting/finishing point will be extensive due to surrounding road network (A21, A259 etc.) so it is important that more analysis is undertaken with regards the impact on the village and surrounding area upto Salehurst.

Compulsory Purchase

The consideration for compulsory purchase seems very heavy handed for trying to secure land for what could be seen as a 'hobby' project that would only benefit those directly involved in RVR and not the wider community. The landowners do not wish to sell and wish to continue to farm the land they own as they see fit and have done for several generations. If the scheme was of regional and national infrastructure importance then there maybe a case for considering compulsory purchase but for something that is a non essential tourist/hobby attraction I am concerned that it is a very negative step to take when we should be supporting farmers/landowners.

It feels like a minority group of people with strong financial backing are trying to impose their interests onto the community and landowners who oppose their application.

I hope that you will note my concerns and consider the option that a public enquiry is required to consider this application in greater detail.

Yours Sincerely,

Simon Fathers

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