

Copy of email to South East of England Councils

The Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council Leader, Mark Worrall, kindly shared with me your letter of 8 August 2011 requesting input on strategic transport matters. Members of this Council are deeply interested in traffic and transportation and this is all the more so because of the significant amount of development planned for the Borough. This will inevitably have impacts on the local traffic environment and a great deal of care will be required to ensure this is mitigated as much as practically possible.

Much of the focus is on matters that are purely local in nature and scope. While important to residents and businesses in this Borough, they are not really matters that merit being aired at a South East Councils level where your declared focus is on high level, strategic transportation issues. I will therefore confine my recommendation to two areas that have a truly regional and even national impact.

The first of these is the proposed dualling of the A21 between Tonbridge and Pembury. The route is part of the strategic road network and, as well as performing its conventional transportation role as part of the trunk road system, it serves to provide a strategic link between the regeneration areas on the south coast, in particular Hastings, and other parts of the south east region, most particularly London. It also links to the wider motorway network and international airports. It is quite clearly, therefore, of regional and national importance in terms of economic development and regeneration.

Yet, in terms of traffic flow, this stretch of the A21 is regularly and severely congested at peak hours because the dual carriageway drops down to a single carriageway between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. Not only is this a wholly unacceptable position on a major strategic trunk road, but these conditions also have a harmful effect upon the local road network in the surrounding area notably the towns of Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells, greatly hindering accessibility. Worse still, the conditions on this single carriageway stretch of the A21 have led to a significant accident record including, sadly, a track record of fatalities.

There has been a proposal to dual this stretch of the A21 for many years but every time the target date for implementation approached it has been postponed. Despite these disappointments, there was a great deal of local expectation that it would be completed in time to give access to, and help the proper functioning of, the new regional hospital being constructed at Pembury.

The new hospital is now well under construction and a significant phase of opening takes place this month with full completion by Autumn 2012. With good access to the new hospital being so vital, the depth of the local community's disappointment can be readily appreciated when it was announced that any work on the proposed dualling scheme had been pushed back to the period beyond 2015 as part of the government's assessment of

strategic highway schemes last year. The current position is that this much needed scheme is not yet firmly on any works programme but it badly needs to be.

The new Pembury hospital project represents a major public investment in health care services for a considerable part of West and Mid Kent. Without the A21 improvements, and bearing in mind the very poor state of other major routes in the area such as the A228, the links to the hospital from towns and communities in the region are poor and will severely damage the effective operation of the new hospital. For this reason and for reasons of regeneration of communities at the far end of the A21 on the south coast, the removal of this bottle-neck on the A21 between Tonbridge and Pembury is a vital and urgent necessity that I would urge South East England Councils to support.

I would just comment a little more on the mention of the A228. This refers particularly to a short length of the road near the hamlet of Colts Hill just north of Pembury which, because of deficient width, alignment and junctions, also suffers regular and prolonged periods of congestion and obstruction. It is the main route to the new hospital from Maidstone and there is real and genuine local concern for the welfare of patients in ambulances who need emergency access to the hospital but might not be able to reach it because the road is blocked. A bypass for Colts Hill was proposed many years ago and there were even designs and drawings completed for it. Unfortunately it consistently failed to secure priority or funding over the years but the factor of the new hospital might be the element that justifies reassessing the case for building this much needed by-pass away from the critical stretch through Colts Hill.

The second transportation matter of strategic significance relates to rail travel. West Kent is a commuter heart-land and two aspects of rail services are of major concern to the Council.

For successive years of the current rail franchise the train operating company, Southeastern Railway, was allowed to adjust its regulated fares using a RPI+3% formula. Inevitably this has resulted in some quite seriously steep percentage rises in fares since the current franchise started in 2006. The contract between Southeastern and the Department for Transport scaled the increase back to RPI+1% for next year and for the remainder of the franchise through to 2014. However, as you will no doubt be aware, in the Comprehensive Spending Review, this RPI+3% formula was extended across the board for all train operating companies, including Southeastern that had already suffered six years of this onerous pricing arrangement. The major local concern is that the cumulative impact of these increases might now have reached a tipping point where people's work travel choices are so seriously impaired that they start to have an adverse regional economic impact. The scale of the rises and the imminent further increases in the new year are matters that this Council will be raising directly with the train operating company in a special forum that it is hosting with local rail user groups in mid-October.

The second rail related transportation matter concerns rail destinations from locations within this Borough. The line from Maidstone East through West Malling to London used to give access to Cannon Street, providing an important City destination for local commuters. A major change in the timetable in 2009 that paralleled the introduction of domestic high speed rail services within Kent resulted in the removal of these City services on the Maidstone East line and left the only London destination as Victoria for all but a very limited early morning and late evening service through Blackfriars. This is having major adverse impacts on commuters in mid and west Kent who relied on these city services and it is creating perverse travel patterns locally, including rail heading by car to services on the west Kent line through Tonbridge and Sevenoaks.

Just before these timetable changes, there was also considerable change to services on the line west out of Tonbridge where it had been possible to reach Gatwick by a direct rail link. This service was removed in 2008 and, since then it has been necessary to make an inconvenient change of trains at Redhill to make this journey. This change was directly contrary to local aspirations for an enhanced direct rail service to strategic transportation destinations in mid and north Kent, readily achievable objectives using existing rail infrastructure.

There are powerful transportation justifications that support both of these aspirations and I would be happy to share further thoughts on them if you would like some further explanation. In any event, I think you might hear more about these rail services matters because they are both key priorities being addressed by the recently formed Kent Rail Forum. This forum is being led by Kent County Council and has the support of Kent District Councils in presenting a joint case for rail service improvement in the next rail franchise for Kent from 2014 onwards.

I hope you find these comments helpful in your assessment of strategic transportation matters for south east England. In the current climate, a request for some commitment to provide officer time is likely to present difficulties for most Councils. Nevertheless, if these matters of strategic importance are to be properly supported some assistance will be necessary and it will, generally, be no more than an extension of work that is already in hand on local priorities. With that in mind, I am sure that we could provide some limited help to support Members' work to promote the key local priorities for this area.