

Grange/Prestonfield Community Council
Report on Debate in the Scottish Parliament
Wednesday 3rd February 2016
On Re-opening the South Suburban Railway for Passenger Traffic

1. Sue circulated notification of this debate and I attended sitting in the public gallery.
2. The Debate was initiated by Jim Eadie MSP (Edinburgh Southern – SNP) who opened the discussion about 5.30pm referring to previous studies on the feasibility of re-opening the South Sub for passenger traffic, in particular praising the work of the Capital Rail Action Group (CRAG) in keeping this issue alive, especially Lawrence Marshall of CRAG. (Some GPCC Members may recall that Lawrence Marshall spoke to us about this a few years ago.) Previous studies had indicated that there could be a positive benefit/cost ratio of around 1.6, but there is now a need to update previous costings and passenger projections in the light of the accelerating growth of rail travel, where for instance the Borders Railway is already meeting its projections.
3. Other MSPs also spoke in support of the re-opening of the South Sub for passenger traffic making different points and the following paragraphs are a summary of issues raised and to be considered without attempting a verbatim report. Other speakers in support included Sarah Boyack MSP (Labour), Cameron Buchanan MSP (Conservative & Unionist) and Alison Johnstone MSP (Green). (A report on the debate, which lasted about an hour, was in the Evening News of Friday 5th February 2016)
4. Light rail tram technology has continued to grow with a number of installations in England up and running and Edinburgh Trams being well used and popular. It encourages people in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way to use their cars less and public transport more. A growing development is tram/train technology where light rail trams run also on standard heavy rail and the first scheme in UK is underway in Sheffield, building on experience elsewhere such as in Germany. This could open up an exciting prospect of integrating the reintroduction of passenger traffic on the South Sub with future tram extensions seamlessly linking Haymarket, Craiglockart, Gorgie, Morningside, Newington, Cameron Toll, Craigmillar round to Waverley, with extensions to ERI, the Bioquarter and beyond. A link such as this could aid future housing projects, reduce needless journeys to the city centre and out again and facilitate public transport links with the campuses of Edinburgh University, which has previously pledged support for the reintroduction of passenger traffic on the South Sub. The existing and forthcoming Edinburgh Local Development Plans also safeguard future tram routes and the South Sub.
5. Running light rail trams on standard train tracks has significant technical challenges, which are having to be addressed in the Sheffield scheme, so looking at this possibility for the South Sub and Edinburgh trams could build on their experience, with the Sheffield scheme due to come into operation in 2017, so the timing is opportune. The technical challenges include accommodating different track and wheel profiles, different voltages and power transmission systems (electrification of the South Sub line is in Network Rail's programme for freight but timing not known), integrating signal and control systems and different platform height requirements etc.
6. In responding on behalf of the Scottish Government, the Transport Minister Derek Mackay did not commit to any expenditure for an updated feasibility study or any capital expenditure, but did agree to meet and take the issue further provided that CEC and transport interests confirm that it has some priority for them and is not just on a wish list. So the ball would seem to be in CEC's court to consider taking this further, maybe in the context of considering future transport infrastructure to meet Edinburgh's stated housing needs.

Tony Harris