

RAILWAY PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF IRELAND

SUMMARY OF BRANCH LINE FEASIBILITY STUDY REPORT AND DISCUSSION

This circular is a summary of the principal findings and recommendations of the Study Group, and of the main arguments made at a subsequent Council Meeting of the Society.

~~~~~

For the past 12 years, Society policy has been to concentrate mainly on the operation of mainline railtours, over NIR and CIÉ lines, using RPSI locomotives and rolling stock, which have been restored, repaired and maintained for that purpose.

We cannot tell for how much longer this policy can be maintained. Although there are no known immediate threats to our continued unrestricted main-line running, many factors on the horizon suggest that such operations could well be curtailed severely within 5 - 10 years from now.

We hope this will not prove to be the case, and we shall press on with our present operations for as long as possible, but it would be wise to seriously investigate possible alternatives, to the extent of having something else in reserve should the necessity arise.

As the establishment of an operational rail-connected branch line would take at least 5 years from conception to opening, we cannot afford to sit back and wait until the need arises.

There are a number of other important arguments.

We have so far made no attempt to preserve the typical infrastructure of a steam-operated railway. Steam trains are becoming increasingly out of place on modern main-line railways with new concrete and glass stations, concrete sleepers, welded rails, remotely-controlled colour-light signals, diesel-electric rolling stock, and bulk freight trains. In a few years from now, traditional signalling, stations, trackwork and train operations will have disappeared, unless active steps are taken to preserve such features.

In our present scene of operations, RPSI volunteers do all the difficult and tedious background work of locomotive and carriage overhaul and maintenance, but then hand our trains over to NIR and CIÉ staff to operate. It is felt that the use of our own drivers, firemen, guards, signalmen, etc., would be a considerable incentive to active participation in RPSI activities.

The Study Group has investigated every possible rail-connected branch in Northern Ireland (the terms of reference specified by the original ARPS commission related to Northern Ireland, as appropriate grant aid was not expected to be available in the Republic).

It is felt essential that any scheme promoted should be rail-connected to the NIR system, for three main reasons, viz:

1. Main-line railtours can continue in parallel with a branch-line project.
2. RPSI rolling stock can be easily, quickly and cheaply transferred to and from the branch.
3. Delivery of track materials, and use of other railway equipment (e.g. cranes, on-track maintenance machines, etc.) can be facilitated.

For a variety of reasons, but mainly due to redevelopment of redundant railway formations for roads, housing, industrial sites, agriculture, etc., the only feasible route is Scarva - Lawrencetown - Banbridge, where the formation is virtually intact.

Outline agreement has been reached with NIR for a junction at Scarva, and for the purchase of redundant track and signalling materials.

Agreement in principle has been reached with the appropriate authorities for crossing of the various roads and rivers on the route. An acceptable design has evolved for a replacement bridge over the realigned Gilford Road at Scarva.

Agreement has also been reached with the appropriate Government organisations about the various legal procedures necessary to obtain authority to operate such a line.

All 26 landowners on the route have been approached, and 23 appear to favour the project. With the confines of a feasibility study (as opposed to a commitment to proceed with the scheme) no attempt has been made to persuade the other three to reconsider their views.

The local Authority, Banbridge District Council, have been approached, and have agreed to back the project, but without any financial commitment as yet.

Finally, an informal approach has been made to the NI Tourist Board, regarding possible Department of Commerce 75% Tourism Grants. The opinion expressed is that such a project would be very likely to qualify for grant-aid, after the present economic recession.

The project has been costed, on the basis of most bridge and structural work being done by Contract, and with all trackwork and similar equipment being installed by volunteers. The purchase of land at full commercial value has been included, as well as all anticipated legal costs. The outcome is that the total cost of Scarva - Lawrencetown (inclusive) (4¾ miles) would be about £400,000, with a further £275,000 required for the 2 mile extension to Banbridge.

Assuming that a 75% Grant would be available, and that the work would be carried out over about 4-5 years (Phase 1, Scarva - Lawrencetown), with a further 2-3 years (Phase 2, Lawrencetown - Banbridge), the Society would have to raise an average of about £25,000 per year, even assuming no local authority financial assistance. If the latter were forthcoming, even to the extent of land purchase, the target figure would be reduced to £15,000 per year, which is of approximately twice the magnitude of our present fund-raising activities.

With the line already built, the actual operation of trains would be self-financing.

These findings have encouraged the Study Group to recommend to the RPSI Council to proceed with the scheme, provided the four basic requirements of Legislation, Local Authority approval, Financial Assistance and Volunteer support can be achieved.

The Council agreed (by a majority) to this recommendation, and are thus putting the matter forward for the comments and decision of the membership at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Society.