



FORTH CROSSING BILL

Scrutiny of the Bill by the Scottish Parliament's Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee

Evidence from The ForthRight Alliance

Wednesday 17th February 2010

EVIDENCE FROM LAWRENCE MARSHALL, CHAIR, FORTHRIGHT ALLIANCE:

In order to comment on the proposals in the Forth Crossing Bill to create a public transport corridor on the current Forth Road Bridge, a little background information and comment might be helpful:

The history of the engagement of the Scottish Parliament with the issues surrounding the existing and proposed road crossings of the Forth at Queensferry is largely an unfortunate saga of serial contradictions coupled with ill-advised and costly populism.

The Scottish Parliament, upon abolishing the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board in 2002, established in its place the Forth Estuary Transport Authority (FETA) - with a remit to not only operate and maintain the Forth Road Bridge but also to invest in transport and infrastructure projects beyond the bridge itself. FETA, as a transport authority, thus produced a Local Transport Strategy (2005) for the bridgehead area to guide such investment. As I wrote, as Convener of FETA, in the Foreword to its Annual Report for 2005-2006, "*a key component of FETA's Local Transport Strategy was ... the introduction of a Road User Charge, with variable charging at peak hours as a means of managing demand and raising revenue for further cross-Forth improvements*".¹

The then Scottish Executive indeed encouraged FETA in its view that the tolling regime then in place was no longer appropriate and that a new charging order should be progressed whereby the emphasis would shift from the movement of vehicles to that of people across the Firth. A new order would also correct the absurdity of HGVs being charged less to cross the bridge than buses - despite the former causing much damage to the structure while the latter were beneficial to FETA's efforts to reduce congestion and offer bridge users a "Guid Passage".

That the Scottish Executive were keen on just such a change in tolling was made most obvious when funding was granted to FETA to enable it to sign the construction contract for the M9 spur - but on condition that an Application in Principle for a variable charging regime be submitted.

Of course, subsequently and as a result of political developments, the Application in Principle was rejected by the Scottish Parliament - which then went on to abolish tolls completely. FETA is no longer a transport authority and its Local Transport Strategy has likewise been abandoned.

With an increase of 40% in traffic volumes over current levels being planned for the new bridge in 2017, even the aspiration to dampen down traffic growth has now been reversed -

¹ See <<http://www.forthroadbridge.org/sites/default/files/documents/Annual%20Report%202005-06.pdf>>.

with a vengeance. Such an increase in traffic, moreover, will have to be accommodated on a surrounding road network in essence much the same as that of today. Buses - although provided with a dedicated crossing over the current bridge - will struggle even more in the face of such traffic increases to make their way into Edinburgh along the A90 corridor and to West Lothian via the M9 spur.

Moreover, the idea that Edinburgh, for instance, would welcome a substantial increase in bus traffic is just fanciful. Bus congestion in the city is already dire - and pollution levels giving real cause for concern along the very road corridors such buses would utilise.

There may be a case for increased bus provision between Fife and West Lothian - the Livingston area in particular. Surely, however, a variable charging regime would be a better way of encouraging an increase in the use of public transport than the construction of a new £2.34 billion bridge which leaves in its wake a vastly under-used existing bridge which has over 70 years of its design life left to run.

No amount of increase in the number of buses crossing the Forth Road Bridge if a new bridge is built can possibly justify the expenditure required - not only the £2.34 billion for the new bridge but also the ongoing cost of operating and maintaining the existing bridge.

It is envisaged that, while 92,000 vehicles per day cross the new bridge in 2017, the "old" bridge will carry a mere 300 buses per day. That represents less than half of one percent of the current volume of 66,000 vehicles - or, to put it another way, a mere six minutes' worth of traffic in an entire day.

Even with an unlikely ten-fold increase in the number of buses using the existing bridge, capacity for some 63,000 extra vehicles would be lying dormant - capacity that users of a congested new crossing will soon be demanding be opened up to them as well. We will have spent a fortune to be in a far worse position than before as regards traffic congestion over the Forth at Queensferry.

Far better that the Scottish Government work to resolve the problems of the existing bridge within more easily available budgets.

Moreover, if indeed £2.34 billion is available, some of that money should in our view be spent instead on more deserving and socially useful projects throughout the land. These could, of course, include measures to reduce train fares in Fife and the Lothians to the levels pertaining in Strathclyde - coupled with very modest expenditure on a couple of long-awaited signals on the Forth Bridge to allow a more frequent train service to run. Longer trains and platforms, coupled with a greater variety of destinations served by train and/or tram-train within the city and throughout the Lothians, would help as well. Buses and ferries could also benefit from increased public support both in terms of capital and revenue expenditure.

In summary, then, the best use of the existing bridge is to keep it for general traffic - with variable charging in place to better utilise current capacity in terms of moving people, not just vehicles, across the Firth. There should be no new bridge - a project which is simply unsustainable both financially and environmentally and which is, moreover, socially unjust.

No realistic proposed increase in public transport provision across the existing bridge should a new bridge be built can ever justify the cost involved nor mitigate the redundancy thereby created on the "old" bridge.

Lawrence Marshall,
Chair, ForthRight Alliance
5 Rose Street, Edinburgh, EH2 2RD
Tel.: (0131) 669 1336
<<http://www.forthrightalliance.org>>

•••••