



Wednesday 22nd January 2020

“Unprecedented” opposition to tunnel abandonment

Campaigners hoping to reopen a disused West Yorkshire railway tunnel as a cycle route have thanked supporters after 6,000 objections were lodged against plans to abandon the structure.

Queensbury Tunnel, connecting Bradford District and Calderdale, is managed on the Department for Transport’s behalf by Highways England who propose to partially infill it due to perceived safety concerns. The work, which involves leaving 88% of the tunnel to collapse, would permanently prevent access for inspection purposes. A planning application for the scheme - which is now expected to cost the taxpayer around £7 million - was published last June.

The Queensbury Tunnel Society believes that the money would be better invested in repairs, restoring the tunnel to a condition suitable for its use as part of a Bradford-Halifax Greenway. In 2018, consultants acting for Bradford Council developed a remediation plan costed at £6.9 million.

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Society, said: “There is a ridiculous conflict between the stated aims of the DfT and Highways England who want to encourage more walking and cycling through investment in new active travel routes, but remain intent on the unwarranted destruction of a 1.4-mile long tunnel which could play a crucial, centrepiece role in a strategic link between two large urban centres. As we move towards more sustainable forms of transport, the value of the tunnel as an asset will increase.

“No sound engineering evidence has been provided by Highways England to justify its abandonment scheme, the design of which is driven by budgetary constraints. We’re very grateful to the 6,000 people who have objected to the plans, citing the technical shortcomings and misfit with both local and national planning policies.

“It’s been an unprecedented response and we call on the council to reject Highways England’s application.”

Supported by other stakeholders, Bradford Council has formally endorsed the greenway proposal and worked with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority to develop a £23 million bid to fund construction and long-term maintenance. A decision is expected in the spring. A study by Sustrans suggested that the route would generate £37.6 million in social, economic and tourism benefits over 30 years, returning £2.31 for every £1 spent on it.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps MP recently told Channel 4 News that “I’m really keen on seeing that very environmentally-friendly tunnel reopened if we can get there” and agreed to visit Queensbury to see it as soon as possible. In November, officials from the Department for Transport met counterparts in Bradford Council to discuss funding options for the tunnel and issues around feasibility.

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To link to a video on the Bradford-Halifax Greenway or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/LzfdJna0Tno>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/LzfdJna0Tno?rel=0" frameborder="0" allow="autoplay; encrypted-media" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

A collection of high-resolution photos for Media use is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/media/imagery.shtml

More general information on the campaign is available from:

www.queensburytunnel.org.uk/

Contacts

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Notes for editors

Queensbury Tunnel was built by the Great Northern Railway between 1874 and 1878 as part of the Halifax, Thornton & Keighley Railway. Work was initially expected to take two years but was delayed significantly by two of the seven construction shafts having to be abandoned due to water ingress. At least ten navvies lost their lives during the work.

The tunnel, which is 2,501 yards (2,287 metres) long, opened to freight traffic in October 1878 and passenger trains in December 1879. The line between Holmfield and Queensbury, which included the tunnel, was officially closed on 28th May 1956. Track lifting took place in 1963.

Queensbury Tunnel would be the longest in the UK to host a shared path if the proposal to reopen it for such a purpose is successful. Currently Combe Down Tunnel in Bath holds that position at 1,829 yards (1,672 metres). The longest in Europe is the 2,931-yard (2,680 metres) Uitzu Tunnel on the Plazaola Greenway in northern Spain. However plans are being developed to restore Rhondda Tunnel in South Wales for cycle path use; this has a length of 3,443 yards (3,148 metres).

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE), part of Highways England, is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,200 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, cuttings, culverts and viaducts. HRE's remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30th September 2013.



HRE's proposed abandonment scheme has been split into two phases, the first of which is for preparatory works and got underway on 1st October 2018. However the contractor, AMCO-Giffen, pulled most of its staff and equipment out of the tunnel in October 2019 after a significant inundation of floodwater. No.2 Shaft was infilled under emergency planning powers later that month.

Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that the original estimated cost of the preparatory works was £550,000, but had risen to £3.61 million by the end of October 2019. The scheme's main phase requires planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen at £3.016 million. However, before any further works can take place, the tunnel will have to be dewatered at an estimated cost of £350,000.

According to research by Churchill Home Insurance published in October 2019, the single UK planning application which received the greatest number of objections over the preceding three years was for an incinerator in Hamilton, near Glasgow, where 7,080 people registered their opposition. Other districts which recorded high volumes of objections for a single application included Newcastle-upon-Tyne (3,937), Swale (3,734) and Aberdeenshire (3,004).