

PRESS RELEASE

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways and Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance

Campaigners “gutted” at regional failure to prioritise public transport schemes for funding

Campaigners for public transport have expressed their anger at the decision by the South West Regional Assembly members to fund rural road schemes ahead of new public transport schemes in the towns and cities. (The Assembly's priorities can be found at http://www.southwest-ra.gov.uk/media/SWRA/Executive%20Committee/13th%20Feb%202009/Paper_C_-_Appendix.pdf). (1)

Most of the urban and public transport schemes have been pushed to the very end of the bid period for funding from 2017 and then only if money is available. Like other cities in the region, Bristol and the West of England have come off badly.

For example the Greater Bristol Metro rail project (1) and the Hengrove to North Fringe rapid transit scheme are scheduled for 2017 onwards. Public transport schemes in Gloucester, Swindon, Exeter and Plymouth are also scheduled towards the end of the bid. Although the Portishead rail reopening is in the programme, it will not be funded until 2014 at the earliest, and only if a future government continues with the regional funding system.

The Assembly has prioritised rural road schemes rather than much cheaper rail improvements which would benefit a wider geographical area, particularly the west of England. In addition other road schemes have also been "parachuted in" at the last minute, such as the A30 Temple project and the A303 which took a 10% slice of the money.

The region has ignored the government's criteria for projects. Schemes must be in major areas of economic importance, deprivation, or in areas of future population growth; they must also be on regionally significant routes and should not lead to increased carbon emissions. Unlike the schemes in the West of England, which have been thoroughly prepared, the road schemes given a high priority do not meet these criteria.

Rob Dixon, from Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR) said “Just as they did last time there was government money available, rather helping the economy by supporting schemes in places where the jobs are, like Bristol, Swindon and Exeter, the region are building roads in rural areas again. This is stupid during a recession. It won't help the economy, it won't help people get to work, and it won't build the public transport schemes that we want and desperately need”.

Rob Dixon, from Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR) said, “The schemes that the

region has considered to be of high priority are not on important routes, they are mostly in rural areas, and not where future population growth is planned. They do not meet the government's criteria.”

Pip Sheard from the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance said, “We are gutted that Portishead and Bristol Metro projects weren't chosen for immediate funding. Everyone wanted these vital and cost-effective rail schemes – local residents, councillors, business and our local MPs. The whole process is a complete farce and a ludicrous way of allocating funding for public transport schemes. We are competing with other councils for a limited pot of money.”

Campaigners are calling on the region to change its priorities by putting back the South Devon Link Road and the Westbury Bypass and bringing forward the good public transport schemes that will benefit the the region's economy in a recession. Although these two schemes are considered to be “commitments”, government advice (2) says that the order of priorities can be changed.

Campaigners argue that since funding is limited and there are schemes that will benefit the economy more, these are neither affordable nor appropriate at the moment. Campaigners now believe that it is vital for the West of England to set up an Integrated Transport Authority that would be a more powerful body to lobby government from a position of strength, as other cities have done.

Pip Sheard from the Transport for Greater Bristol Alliance, said “We want the region to change their priorities. They should be supporting schemes that will benefit many people, not rural road schemes that will help no-one, just damage the environment. We hope they'll move back the rural road projects and bring forward good public transport schemes”.

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- 1) The priorities listed at http://www.southwest-ra.gov.uk/media/SWRA/Executive%20Committee/13th%20Feb%202009/Paper_C_-_Appendix.pdf are listed as *front*, *mid* and *back*. It should be noted that these refer to the period *after* 2019 as well as the five year period of the funding bid (2014-9). Therefore projects such as the Emerson's Green to Temple Meads Rapid Transit scheme (listed as 'back') are for the period *after* 2019, and the Hengrove to North Fringe Rapid Transit scheme (listed as 'front/mid') are for the middle of the period 2014-2024.
- 2) The government says that priorities can change. More details can be found at <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/regional/strategy/rfa/rfaround2/RFA supplementarynote1.pdf>