

FENLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

PRESS RELEASE

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New hope in campaign to reopen Wisbech Rail

Hopes of reopening Wisbech Rail have been revived this week after an independent study concluded that the project would be financially viable.

There have been fears that the £200 million projected cost of the project would mean that Wisbech remained cut off from the rail network for the foreseeable future.

But a draft Full Business Case has concluded that restoring a heavy rail link between Wisbech and Cambridge would be practicable, provide value for money and be “transformative” for the town’s economic potential.

The study, commissioned by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, states that a station located near the town centre would be the most commercially viable option, with a two trains per hour service running between Wisbech and Cambridge.

It notes that the rail upgrade represents less than half the projected cost, with most of the funding needed for highways solutions to bring the 22 level crossings on the historic line up to modern safety standards with closures and road diversions.

At a meeting yesterday, the Combined Authority Board welcomed the findings of the report and an accompanying GRIP3b (Governance for Railway Investment Projects) study that outlines the bespoke business case requirements for rail projects expected by Network Rail.

The Board delegated authority to the Transport and Infrastructure Committee to approve the final version of the FBC, which will be published in due course, and approved continued engagement with the Department for Transport, and other central government departments to explore funding of the project through the £500million Restoring Your Railway Fund.

Welcoming the report, the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, James Palmer, said: “I am absolutely delighted to see this come through. We didn’t have a proper business case to take to the Government before, we do now, and that makes a significant difference. From Day 1 as Mayor, restoring Wisbech rail services has been a key objective for me, and it’s a giant leap to get to this stage. While we don’t yet know the impact of Covid 19 on public spending, I will be calling on Government to move this on.”

Fenland District Council Leader, Cllr Chris Boden, said: “This is an exciting moment in the long-running Wisbech Rail campaign. Although there is much work still to be done, this study provides a compelling case to push forward with plans to reopen the line.

“The Government’s Restoring Your Railway Fund offers the best opportunity to bring the project to fruition, and having this full business case already in place will put us in a strong position to submit a bid for funding.”

Wisbech district and county councillor, Cllr Steve Tierney, added: “We have waited for the GRIP3 report for a long, long time. We’ve had people suggest that the report was not going to help our case for Wisbech Rail. We’ve had people suggest that the independent study

would conclude that Wisbech Rail was not financially viable. So it is great news that these fears have been shown to be unfounded and this is a big step forwards.

“We are still some way off getting our rail line back, but this is an important milestone on that road that and great news for Wisbech and for Fenland.”

Cllr Samantha Hoy, district and county councillor for Wisbech and Leader of Wisbech Town Council, said: “I’m so happy about this news. Wisbech Rail is such an important project for the town and residents have waited a long time for it. The reopening of the line would be a huge boost for Wisbech, worth tens of millions of pounds to the local economy and Cambridgeshire as a whole, and provide many benefits for people living and working here.”

Cllr Chris Seaton, Fenland District Council’s Portfolio Holder for Transport, added: “Never before has the Government been so committed to driving forward the reversal of the controversial Beeching cuts and I’m hopeful that some of the investment going into reopening Britain’s railways makes its way to Wisbech.

“Improving connectivity and infrastructure is essential to regenerating the area, levelling up access to opportunities, cutting congestion on our roads and allowing our economy to grow.”

Combined Authority officers are expected to meet with the Department for Transport, the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail officials in July to present the outcome of the FBC and GRIP3 and discuss next steps.

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For more information contact Fenland District Council press office on 01354 622226