



Wednesday 24th October 2018

Tunnel scheme likely to have “significant effects on the environment”

Highways England will have to produce an Environmental Impact Assessment to support plans for the abandonment of a disused railway tunnel under Queensbury in West Yorkshire as a result of concerns over the potential for ground settlement.

Campaigners hope to reopen the Victorian structure, 1.4 miles in length, as part of a cycle network connecting Bradford and Keighley to Halifax, but Highways England’s Historical Railway Estate (HRE) - responsible for managing the tunnel on the Department for Transport’s behalf - wants to permanently close it at a cost to the taxpayer of £3.6 million.

HRE’s proposed abandonment scheme involves infilling about 15% of the tunnel and allowing the rest to collapse, including the section under the populated part of Queensbury. Seven shafts would also be backfilled. The work requires planning permission and, in May, Bradford Council was asked for a screening opinion as to whether an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was also necessary. An EIA is the process by which decision-makers are held to account for the potential environmental impact of their proposals, based on detailed studies and public comments.

Jacobs, a firm of consulting engineers acting on HRE’s behalf, has made three submissions looking at the tunnel’s likely interaction with the extensive historic coal workings found locally. Its most recent report, running to 83 pages, concluded that the abandonment scheme presents “low risk”.

However, in respect of possible ground settlement, a response from the Coal Authority makes it clear that “there is a potentially complex relationship between the tunnel and the recorded [mine] shafts which merits much more detailed investigation and analysis.” It went on to state that the potential for unrecorded workings to affect the tunnel needs to be given deeper consideration.

On Tuesday, Bradford Council informed Jacobs that an EIA was needed, asserting that the abandonment scheme “is likely to have significant effects on the environment.”

Norah McWilliam, leader of the Queensbury Tunnel Society, said: “Once again, Highways England and its consultants have shown themselves to be out of their depth. It’s clear they haven’t effectively understood the consequences of allowing the tunnel to collapse under Queensbury as a result of the area’s mining legacy. Many of the coal workings are so old they were not recorded.

“The only reasonable approach is to maintain access into the tunnel for inspection purposes, allowing any emerging problems to be seen and properly managed. All the alternatives involve a level of doubt that local people should not have inflicted on them.

“Any confidence we had in Highways England has now ebbed away. We are not prepared to accept an abandonment plan that would leave a festering uncertainty below our village. And there’s a huge sum of taxpayers’ money at stake here. Instead of frittering more of it away, they should call a halt now and use it to transform the tunnel into a fantastic public asset.”

--ENDS--



To link to a new video on the tunnel campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) <https://youtu.be/Yij7v7lM2H4>

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Yij7v7lM2H4?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/

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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 'temporary works' and got underway on 1st October. It has an estimated cost of £550,000. The second



phase would require planning permission and has been costed by AMCO-Giffen, the appointed contractor, at £3.016 million. On 22nd October, Bradford Council informed Highways England that it would need to produce an Environmental Impact Assessment to accompany any planning application due to the complex relationship between the tunnel - most of which would be allowed to collapse - and historic local mine workings.