

## Levy on new houses could revive 1960s railway links

By Ben Webster, Transport Correspondent, The Times 26th October 2006

RAIL lines that closed 40 years ago could be reopened under plans by which developers pay for new tracks in return for planning permission to build thousands of homes.

British Rail shut a third of the network in the 1960s, claiming that it could not compete with the growth in car ownership. But road congestion has become so severe that local authorities are seeking to restore dozens of lines that last carried trains in the age of steam.

The Department for Transport has studied several routes and concluded that train services would be well used. However, it has claimed that it cannot afford the cost of relaying tracks and rebuilding stations.

In response, developers have offered to cover the cost by paying a "roof tax" of £10,000 for each home they build close to the reopened routes. They are confident of finding buyers willing to pay a premium for a home with good rail links.

They have identified four disused lines they believe have the greatest potential: Lewes to Uckfield in East Sussex, Buxton to Matlock in the Peak District, Oxford to Cambridge via Bedford, and extending the Tamar Valley line in Devon to Tavistock.

*Kilbride Group*, a development company, commissioned a £100,000 feasibility study on reinstating the eight-mile line from Lewes to Uckfield and found that it would attract 3,000 passengers a day.

The line closed in 1969 after BR claimed passenger numbers were too low to justify repairing a flood-damaged bridge. The track bed remains largely intact, although parts have been turned into a footpath.

The line would serve as an alternative route from Brighton to London, ending the need to put passengers on fleets of buses during engineering works. The Brighton main line is already heavily congested and passenger numbers are forecast to grow 30 per cent in

the next decade. The developer has calculated that they could fund the £50 million cost of reopening the line if they receive planning permission for 4,000 homes along the route, plus some commercial development round the stations. They admit that most of the homes would be on green belt land but say the proximity of the line would ease pressure on local roads.

Brian Hart, chairman of the Wealden Line restoration campaign, said: "Thousands of new homes have been earmarked for Sussex anyway so we might as well get a new line out of it."

Restoring the Oxford to Cambridge route, known as the east-west link, would halve the journey time by rail between the cities. Passengers currently have to spend almost three hours travelling via London.

A group of local authorities are developing proposals, to be published early next year, for reopening the line in stages, starting with the eastern section. The work, which is likely to exceed £100 million, would be paid for by a roof tax on new homes in Milton Keynes, Aylesbury and smaller communities along the route.

Phyllis Starkey, Labour MP for Milton Keynes South West, said: "It's well established for developers to pay for new roads so why shouldn't they pay for rail lines? "There are plans for huge housing growth in Milton Keynes and the link would help prevent the roads clogging up."

Network Rail said that it would be keen to work with developers on restoring lines and would incorporate them into the national network once they were complete.