

Gotthard... going? : George Hoekstra reports on the future of the route

Autor(en): **Hoekstra, George / Stone, Bryan**

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GOTTHARD...GOING?

George Hoekstra reports on the future of the route

Dark clouds over (the future of) the Gotthard Summital line. This view of a deserted Göschenen station was taken from the Schöllenen Railway, passing over the Gotthard tunnel mouth, on the way to Andermatt.

PHOTO: George Hoekstra

Swiss Railway journalists were recently invited to a presentation by the SBB on the “Future of the Gotthard Summital Route after the opening of the Base Tunnel”, at the no longer operating buffet at Göschenen. In my opinion the most telling aspect was the person making the presentation – Toni Haefliger, head of the Department for the Preservation of Monuments of the SBB. Is it that after the opening of the NEAT route, the summit route is only regarded as a monument? During the presentation this became quite clear. The SBB would certainly like to help preserve this culturally and hugely politically important link between north and south, opened in 1882, but – and it is a very big but – who will pay for it? Just the maintenance of the complicated infrastructure, with all its bridges and tunnels, already costs between CHF50 & 55m a year. Even after slimming it down (partly single track route; taking out most passing loops and sidings) it would still be CHF35 m. Today these costs are internally subsidized by the Intercity passenger traffic account, which is profitable. In the long run, this could not be justified and these costs would have to be paid by the Confederacy and the

Cantons. Are they willing to pay this huge amount? The SBB feels the solution is dependent on the route being given World Heritage Status as an “Historical Transit Route” by UNESCO. At the moment, Switzerland itself is a member of the UNESCO Arbitration Committee and it is not considered appropriate for a member to submit an application from its own country, so this will have to be on hold for the next two years until Switzerland steps down. However, this time could be used to enlist the help of the Federal Offices for Culture and Traffic – who would have to be consulted about any changes to installations and infrastructure anyway – to put together a very robust submission. Today’s traffic is already limited to Intercity and freight traffic, which will all go through the base tunnel as soon as it opens. Even today, there is no local traffic left; it has been switched to the road a long time ago. Most stations are thus unstaffed and buffets closed. As is usual in these cases, media speculation is rife, ranging from giving the summit tunnel over to road traffic, to “heritage trains” for tourists. I do not “do” speculation – it is a waste of time - I will sit back and wait. *Watch this space!*

and Bryan Stone adds...

Also linked with the future of the historic railway route is the future of the local communities. Of these Göschenen is already a shadow of its earlier self, when almost all trains stopped there, but new developments at Andermatt may help. Erstfeld, where the 1 in 37 grade starts, is today the most vulnerable. In 1880 1,200 people lived here, many were tunnellers. With the opening of the railway in 1882 locomotives were changed here, freights re-marshalled for the mountain section, and assistant engines added. In 1910, before WW1 and electrification in 1917, there were 3,139 people and the depot and yards were at the heart of Gotthard operations. For 128 years traffic has always outstripped all improvements in power and speed, even with electrification, so by 1970 4,516 inhabitants were recorded many servicing the SBB operation. Today the workshops are mostly shut and the yards shunt no wagons, although Crossrail, BLS, DB Cargo, SBB Cargo still all have traction depots here offering some employment whilst the old route is open. SBB talks of locating its Tunnel Intervention Centre at Erstfeld with about 80 jobs, but the base tunnel starts north of the community and by-passes it. The Autobahn also by-passes it and few, except rail fans, turn off. Erstfeld's 'raison d'être' is railways, a tourist centre it is not - but could it become one?

GOTTHARD – THE FINAL BREAKTHROUGH Editor

At 14.17 on Friday 15th October the final breakthrough took place on the 57km Gotthard Basetunnel. Switzerland now has the longest railway tunnel in the world, although it will be 2017 before service trains start to run through this engineering masterpiece. Work commenced on this CHF9.7 billion project in 1999 following the 1992

referendum when over 60% of Swiss voters approved the overall concept of building the Lötschberg and Gotthard base tunnels. When operational the new tunnel will cut the alpine transit distance on this historic route by 40km and reduce the height that trains currently have to climb by 600m giving an overall saving of 1 hour on Zürich-Milan transit times. Soon to retire Federal Transport Minister Moritz Leuenberger, who raised the finance and steered the project into being, was present at the breakthrough and took a leading role in the celebrations held deep under the Alps between Sedrun and Faido. The live coverage on Swiss television was watched by millions, reflecting the enormous popular sentiment that this project has commanded in the country.

Pictures from Neue Zürcher Zeitung - NZZ Online. Website: www.nzz.ch.

