Who pays what? : Bryan Stone reports that Swiss Railways are facing a financial bottleneck

Autor(en): **Stone, Bryan**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): **- (2011)**

Heft 106

PDF erstellt am: **06.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854691

WHO PAYS WHAT?

Bryan Stone reports that Swiss Railways are facing a financial bottleneck

Swiss train fares are too low. Buying a 2nd Cl. single at Genève or Zürich airport, and suffering a crushing exchange rate burden you may feel otherwise, but the reality is that most travellers pay far less. As a visitor, your Swiss Travel Cards let you through as you are welcome guests. No, the real problems are the result of the extraordinary recent success of Swiss railways for everyday Swiss life, bringing changes in demography, living and working practices. So where shall we start?

The Halb-Tax (Half-price card) ticket of the 1980s, marketed at a cut-rate of CHF100 was a great stimulus; many bought one who never took the train before - valid a year, it made spontaneous journeys realistic. Then the Taktfahrplan of 1982 did its share. No need for enquiries. With an hourly train you went to the station and travelled. Next came Bahn 2000, with the cut-offs, high-speed lines and speeding-up which cut journey times remarkably. With this the Taktfahrplan, which relies on a one-hour modular pattern between nodal points, and repetition throughout the day, could really pay off. Then came NEAT, with the new Lötschberg Tunnel taking 40 minutes out of a key group of national routes. Trade was booming and with it passenger journeys, business and leisure. There are now half-hourly frequencies of 12 and 16-car double-deck trains on main routes (and others). More stock is on order, but crowding is at peak times endemic and more capacity is an urgent matter. And don't look at the motorways - they're mostly worse.

The snag is that the improvements cannot pay for themselves. Clearly they make for a better Switzerland, where mobility and cleanliness belong to efficiency and competition. Votes for the money from government were always supported. There is the Gotthard to come, 57 km of tunnel, an hour less between Zürich and the Ticino (or Milano) and think of all that freight off the highway! In the public discussion it is the SBB which occupies the ground, with BLS and the others in subordinate roles. No talk of privatization intrudes, except in one or two right-wing think-tanks. The problem is what do we do as a country to handle nationwide mobility in 10 and 20 years' time?

The new mobility has one feature which was not in the growth forecasts. It is that business and residential Switzerland is a finite space, and that small, old, self-sustaining and independent towns (and even Cantons) have become satellites in several powerful business agglomerations whose hearts are now only an hour apart. Indeed, even the local transport networks of some of these, based on local politics, have expanded until they meet. A railway system first designed by Stephenson and Swinburne in 1850 to link the outposts of a fragmented Confederation, has now become part of these business clusters. A few years ago only bankers and foreigners commuted between Bern and Zürich, or Zürich and Basel. Yesterday's travellers made trips when they had to…now the trains are full.

But these people don't all buy tickets. As you can now go further in the same time, a Swiss exotic has lost its exclusiveness. The General-Abonnement (GA) is the national all-modes pass costing CHF3,300 in 2nd Class. That compares, for a journey between Bern and Zürich, with a Halb-Tax fare of CHF92 open return, or CHF68 for a day return. Now think that you don't live at the Hauptbahnhof but have another daily suburban journey, and that your GA is valid 365 days on trains, trams, buses anywhere, even to your ski resort, and there is no more hassle. So many regulars today enjoy what was a real eye-popping privilege 30 years ago, buying themselves a GA. Now think again. In relation to a Swiss salary CHF3,300 is not much. Some £2,450 for the whole country for a year is a bargain compared to the Season Ticket of the typical London or Birmingham commuter that only gives them a miserable hour on a packed local train, and only on the route to work.

There are now over 400,000 GAs sold, with over 40% of main-line passengers using them (45% between Bern and Zürich); and while the planned revenue guideline in passenger traffic is 18 cents/km, the GA holder pays around 10 cents/km. The picture is less dramatic in reality, because many GA journeys are off-peak leisure. My 1st Class pensioners' GA costs CHF4,000 and I am often in half-empty trains. I don't commute (thank heaven) but if I try to ride with Bramble (whom readers know, and who has a Dog-GA at CHF700)on the one hour trip back to Basel on a late afternoon train from Bern it's a packed commuter train too. Separating the peak and off-peak business with differentiating fares may happen but it is still in its infancy. In the meantime Bern-Zürich ridership has increased by 20% in 5 years.

The real crunch is yet to come as there are other pressures. Population and spending power are growing fast. Rising home prices in booming areas such as Zürich and Genève make commuting, as in Britain, the only affordable alternative, whilst some planning policies, "life-style" advertising, and the building industry, encourage young families to choose life in the country where public transport is expensive to provide. A third of Switzerland is Alps and water (much of it, mercifully, protected), resulting in a running conurbation developing alongside the railway corridors, where once there were just cows and fruit trees.

Most seriously, it has been apparent for some time that SBB could not pay its regular maintenance and renewals (not counting projects such as the Gotthard NEAT tunnel) out of its income, subsidies and grants. One problem is that the success has also entrained higher maintenance, as all those heavier, faster trains hammer the track. Suggestions are now in the ring. A higher charge for track access; a higher levy of heavy goods vehicles in transit; higher fuel charges; higher motorway tolls (CHF40 for a year is also absurdly cheap); contributions by employers for infrastructure investment (as they benefit their employees); higher rail fares; restoring the GA to its previous rarity status. As the sums are coming together, for highways as well as rail, and a Government target date of 2030 is approaching, it means decisions on a number of major, and increasingly expensive infrastructure projects needed even to handle today's traffic properly need to be taken in short order. If I can't quote the answers yet, it is clear that cheap mobility can no longer boom on the back of expensive public infrastructure for which users and beneficiaries are reluctant to pay. The next, already inescapable, round will hurt.