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Expo 2001: Switzerland reflected in the Jura lakes

Controversial mega-event

A fair for the people? Or a market place for the economy? Five cantons, four towns and three lakes are inviting you to Expo 2001. The public does not yet really know what to expect.

First the glitter in the eye was for a cable car across the lake, then it was for artificial islands and futuristic speedboats. Whether by water or air, places normally several hours drive or several days sail away from each

Alice Baumann

other were to be brought dramatically closer together. But long before the solidarity of the people living round the lakes of Morat, Neuchâtel and Biel could be celebrated, bitter controversy about feasibility and information policy was dividing Switzerland.

The number of committees and commissions was very great, as was the secrecy. Only bits of concepts which still needed hatching, revising and perhaps rejecting reached the ears of public opinion.

It has now become clear that Expo 2001 is intended to be a dynamic exhibition, in constant movement on water and land, well developed and fully supported, with room for fantasy and candour. Ten questions for the future (e.g. new social structures), five main themes (e.g. power and freedom), five key characters (e.g. the fairy) and lots more will encourage visitors to think aloud as part of the search for tomorrow's creativity. As the motto puts it: "Time or Switzerland in Motion".

The various budgets were adopted before the essential decisions on content were made. The cost would be Sfr. 1.3

billion, of which Sfr. 215 million would be provided by tax payers and Sfr. 550 million by private donors. The rest would be covered by gate sales.

But apart from this there is so far nothing more than a grand design. The "laboratory of Switzerland", as the exhibition initiators put it, will have plenty of room for experiments and utopias. But vague statements of this kind do not soothe critics. These are afraid that the Expo is a cultural fig-leaf to combat the recession. They think that it will be used as an occasion to achieve higher work and living standards through a disguised economic promotion programme – the real aim being to provide new employment in building, culture, tourism and manufacture.

It is true that the Expo will be a good excuse to construct motorways, build car parks, lay down railways and create new hotels in the cantons of Berne, Neuchâtel, Fribourg, Vaud and Jura, as well as in the towns of Biel, Neuchâtel, Yverdon and Morat. The federal government's feasibility study assumes that about half the number of visitors will travel by private means, and this is very disappointing to the Greens. They want the national exhibition to leave traces in people's minds but not in nature.

Eco-Expo?

As a result, the wind is blowing very strongly against the economic plans. For example, the planned national exhibition is a potential nightmare both for the many owners of holiday homes along the southern escarpment of the Jura and for sailors. With its vineyards, sand banks, reed marshes, meadows, woods, cycling and walking trails, this

Expo 2001 as envisioned by the initiators: a pipe dream or soon to be reality? (Photo: zvg)

landscape is simply idyllic. Their concern: "A national exhibition should not degenerate into an amusement park."

The requirements of Switzerland's big environmental organisations are substantial: protection of the ecologically sensitive lake shores and fish populations, no speed boats, as little extra automobile traffic as possible and incentives for environmentally compatible development throughout the country. It is argued that the national exhibition will achieve its objective of communicating a visionary and utopian Switzerland only through a policy of thrifty use of energy and with wastes being recycled to the maximum.

Approval by municipalities and parliament

In spite of the strong controversy, the municipal councils of the towns concerned have so far followed the Expo promoters blindly. For example, the Morat council agreed to provide a grant for the Expo to the tune of Sfr. 2.8 million without a single vote against, while for its part Neuchâtel agreed to provide Sfr. 5.2 million very easily. In Biel – which was the only Expo town where a referendum was held – a narrow majority of voters agreed to a Sfr. 8 million contribution. In December the National Council approved an earlier Council of States' decision to provide a federal grant of Sfr. 130 million in the hope of reconciling French-speaking Switzerland, which is strongly in favour of the Expo, with the much more reserved German-speakers.

While some politicians wax eloquent about the subject, the more sceptical among them are very worried. They are afraid that the Expo might be as much of a flop as were the 1991 700th anniversary celebrations in the founding cantons.

