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SBB AND THE FUTURE

Der Beobachter

RABDe 514 057-9 at Zurich Hb. PHOTO: *Bryan Stone*

In February the Federal Transport Department (BAV) and the SBB held a joint press conference in Bern where Philippe Gauderon, SBB's Infrastructure Director, presented future financial requirements for the renewal and maintenance of their infrastructure. These are some CHF850m (or 60%) above the railways' present annual budget of CHF1.48 billion. CHF435m of the additional funding is required to make good the shortfalls of recent years; CHF140m for structural inadequacy, such as renewal of catenary; the rest for costs arising out of the level of traffic demanded by public authorities and users now and in coming years. Also some additional costs arise from altered legal requirements such as new safety installations in tunnels.

Newly appointed Director Gauderon insisted that safety standards are not yet in question. He had commissioned the independent study of infrastructure condition and needs with the support of SBB CEO Andreas Meyer, who assessed the shortfall in maintenance since 1995 at CHF1.35 billion, during which period the rail traffic on the network increased by 47%. Since parts of the network are increasingly suffering from over-crowding, the end is not yet in sight.

BAV Director Max Friedli had in 2004, as the Bern – Olten high speed line entered service and train kilometres again rose sharply, warned that every increase in traffic, increased disproportionately the costs of maintenance. This was not only because of increased wear, but also due to maintenance of heavily trafficked lines becoming more difficult to organize. Herr Friedli confirmed that a crisis of safety such as had occurred elsewhere was not expected but that costs to maintain standards were rising rapidly. Since his 2004 statement the opening of the NEAT Lötschberg base tunnel, along with further improved services, have increased the urgency. SBB's Meyer confirmed that some 15% of present delays on the network reflected an insufficient level of maintenance.

Additional finance is not immediately available. Federal grants to SBB are capped by Parliament, and SBB can itself contribute little. There is the Finance Fund for Public Transport, that is fed from levies on road transport, however this is already earmarked for future capital projects (not only on the SBB) that are equally important for future capacity. A possibility is to raise track access fees for operating companies, whilst passenger fares could be raised – but this is already going to happen. User service contracts with local and Cantonal authorities, who are constantly raising their demands, in any case rule out independent action on pricing. It is clear that Federal Transport Department and SBB, regard this as their joint concern, and that the Federal Treasury is also helping to seek a solution. A further independent agency is now confirming the study results, and a report will be given to parliamentarians before the summer recess. This will permit the subject to be handled in the Autumn session of Parliament.

Railway infrastructure is the responsibility of the BAV, which provides it and charges – through access charges for its use. In this way SBB, BLS and others (including open-access freight operators) are assured of impartial treatment. However, the technical and engineering skills and maintenance work on the main network are provided by the SBB through its Infrastructure Division. This also provides to user operators on the SBB network, facilities such as traction current, marshalling facilities and stations, along with safe signalling, etc. BLS as a second major infrastructure contributor is assimilated in these arrangements. Private and regional railways are assimilated in standards etc., but separately financed, providing and maintaining their own infrastructure.

Also in February SBB's CEO Alex Meyer noted that following the lack of progress over the last two years in finding an international partner railway the company will now be restructured to pursue a different approach. National and International business will be

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PHOTO: *Bryan Stone*

RABDe 500 030-2 "Louis Chevrolet" at Baden. PHOTO: *Bryan Stone*

completely separated to permit different and distinct business strategies. It is planned that SBB Cargo International, a new subsidiary, will take up a partnership with HUPAC, the private Swiss intermodal operator which will have a minority share in SBB Cargo. The new company will aim to establish itself competitively and profitably in North-South transit traffic as a Rail Operating Company, in the sense of EU open market competition. It will concentrate on train operation and not provide cargo handling services. Swiss internal cargo operations will be a separate business, with a standard set of simplified operations as its basis, and with separate service packages for more specialized customers. This includes the servicing of Swiss domestic private sidings, of which there are still several hundred serving many major industries.

The announcement has generally been welcomed by press, political and market interests in Switzerland. Reactions of staff representatives were less enthusiastic, as SBB Cargo will undoubtedly shed staff and some functions, especially in national traffic. However, Meyer announced that job losses should not result, as the rising demand for passenger services and the needs of infrastructure had already created many vacancies.

Interestingly Meyer remarked that the failure to co-operate with DB or SNCF reflected SBB's search for a 'large, strong partner' and those railways had been severely hit by the finance crisis and were large, but not strong. A partnership with HUPAC would be based upon the future potential growth market of intermodal freight as SBB Cargo has a better reputation in the market in Germany and Italy than the respective national railways. Although HUPAC has always maintained a fiercely independent stance in public co-operation with SBB at operational level had of course been normal and its operations have been subsidized by the Swiss "Road-to-Rail" transportation policy on the Trans-

Alpine Corridors. In many respects the creation of SBB Cargo International is an echo of what was done by BLS Cargo, where it has proved relatively successful.

It may also be that the chosen formula also assists in managing the political context of national cargo, in which the use of rail is supported by government policies, and where Swiss industry is dispersed and regionally significant, but the maintenance of national wagon load operations and private siding service is notoriously uneconomic. With a defined business unit responsible for such operations, it will be easier to demand accountability and identify problems.

Also in February SBB signed up with six other European National rail freight operators to promote wagon-load services across the continent. The alliance is to be known as Xrail and preparation for it started in 2007 under the leadership of the UIC. The aim is to achieve a consistent 3-day (as opposed to the current up-to-ten-day) transit time for this traffic and the alliance will focus on chemicals, automotive and paper products. The major downside of the project is the absence of both French and Italian operators.

In March the Swiss Federal Council published two outline proposals for SBB network development in the plan "Bahn 2030" - one at CHF12 billion and a more ambitious one at CHF21 billion. These proposals/sums do not include new lines or measures for the BLS, RhB and other non-federal lines, whose financing has other structures.

Backbone of the plan is the need to increase passenger capacity and speeds. Some routes such as Lausanne-Genève are already heavily overcrowded at peak times, as are many S-Bahn services. The first plan involves the trunk routes St. Gallen – Zürich – Bern – Genève; Lausanne – Brig; Olten – Biel – Lausanne. A chosen instrument is the new, longer double-deck train now in development; the plan requires rolling infrastructure improvements to increase train lengths, speeds and frequencies and to reduce pathing conflicts. Some profile enlargement of tunnels is still required; even existing double-deck trains are currently restricted. Freight is also included; growth on the North-South routes demands improvement of the Aargau Südbahn, the vital by-pass

RABe 523 003-2 FLIRT at Brunnen.
PHOTO: *Photo Phil Emond*

between Brugg and Rothrist, and the Bötzberg line between Basel and Brugg. These form the northern approach to the Gotthard, where the new base tunnel opens in 2017. The second plan adds Bern – Neuchâtel; Luzern – Zug; Zürich – Gotthard – Lugano.

These plans produced uproar from the various regions that felt that they were left out. Principal of these is Basel, where the plans appear to ignore the international traffic, also fast growing, for which the German government is now building a high-speed 4-track main line to Basel Bad. Bhf. and the SBB is renewing the corresponding Rhein bridge. Since the Basel S-Bahn is also overcrowded and delayed by congestion, and expresses are already timed at 2 minute headways, pressure for a new 'Wiesenberg' tunnel (effectively giving 4 tracks) between Liestal and Olten has been strong. In addition, the absurdity of single track in critical parts of the Lötschberg base tunnel high-speed line is outside the SBB plan but cannot be ignored.

It is clear that the Federal Council has taken a political view, to state first that new rail capacity must come. What, and how, before it knows how the financing of either plan can be assured, will give scope for debate; SBB CEO Meyer sees higher productivity, higher fares and public funding as complementary. The Federation of Public Transport Operators (VöV) sees higher fares as irrelevant, and together with the Transport Association of Switzerland (VCS) which already has ready to go to the electorate, a valid initiative to strengthen public against private transport, looks for greater use of taxation and levies to fund the planned rail improvements. As usual right-wing politicians and the automobile lobby will oppose it all.

460 035-9 arrives at Lausanne.
PHOTO: *Photo Phil Emond*