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The 'Läufelfingerli'


Never Say Die, or Democracy in Action.

Bryan Stone

Photos: Bryan Stone

SBB No.526 733 - 1 entering Läfelfingen.

On P12 of *Swiss Express* No.131 there appeared my article on the first Swiss main line, Basel – Olten, that was supported energetically by two Swiss brothers in Liverpool. This is not the route that fast trains take today. They run over the 'New Line' between Sissach – Olten that opened in 1915. The original line was retained as an emergency diversionary route with a local passenger service, subsequently singled, but in 1953 electrified. So it remains today, except that since the late 1990s the passenger service, S9 in the Northwest Swiss tariff group, has been a candidate for closure, as (by 2016) fares only covered 21% of its operating costs. Service closure is not unusual in Switzerland, but this was a curious case. Several times over the last 20-years the Basel-Land Cantonal parliament in Liestal has voted against closure, continuing funding the operating subsidy. However, south of the summit station and a long tunnel the line is in Canton Solothurn, which also pays a subsidy as it draws a real advantage, as in Olten there is considerable employment. In 2015 a right-wing majority in Liestal saw a chance to eliminate a loathed subsidy and announced closure. However, Solothurn only learned of this from the media, and was properly incensed. The costs for a substitute bus over the Jura pass (and taking 20 minutes longer) might, we learned, exceed Basel-Land's savings. Also Olten has major road traffic problems, whilst many S9 users (from Basel-Land) saw their connections to mainline trains in Olten in danger. By the time a sort of agreement emerged, it was too late for the timetable change in 2017. So Liestal made another announcement, of closure in 2019. Immediately, noisy opposition arose, and a Cantonal Initiative to vote against closure was launched. Since few people were really affected, it seemed a forlorn hope. The 24th November last was voting day; remarkably, 65% of the Cantonal voters voted against closure. This was a revolution, and can only be explained in terms of

solidarity (the prosperous towns in sympathy with the hill villages), and a rebound against the sheer clumsiness of the Cantonal government, who virtually wrote off the service without any redeeming thought. So, the voters won, S9 will survive, and the next task is to make something better out of it. Closure would have saved Liestal about CHF850,000/year, visibly trivial compared to typical highway improvements, which enjoy a prosperous political lobbying. Helping to tip the vote was that SBB must in any case maintain the old line to high standards for diversion of main line traffic, as the 1915 tunnel is frequently closed for repairs. 

RIGHT: On board timetable information unit.

BELOW: 526 733 - 1 at Sissach, about to leave for Olten.

