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## Investment plans promise much to savour

IN THE IMMORTAL words of one J. Lennon esq; another year over; a new one just begun. Despite what you may imagine given my somewhat trenchant views on those in charge of what happens in this amazing city, not all that awaits us in 2019 and ongoing is bad. Some things are good. Of course, every change has a potential downside and sadly not everyone will be happy with any changes made.

The already-funded East West Rail link restoring the old Varsity Line between Oxford and Cambridge via Bletchley - which, incidentally I feel should be rebranded Milton Keynes South - is on balance a good thing. However there are still issues with level crossings, at Woburn Sands and Bow Brickhill for instance. When high speed trains are passing every few minutes these will simply not cope and proper planning and investment is required so that bridges and/or tunnels take the road traffic.

Another issue is that those who bought houses with a quiet, hardly ever used rail line at the bottom of their gardens are probably in for a rude awakening, literally, when endlessly long freight trains roll

through at ungodly hours.

Another positive development, in planning by Highways England, is the East West Expressway between Oxford and Cambridge. This is intended to be a fast road system with few junctions - so not intended for local traffic such as parents dropping kids off at school - linking Oxford to Cambridge via Milton Keynes.

This will be a major anchor feature of what has been rather inelegantly dubbed the Camkox Corridor. Highways England also describes it as "a southern bypass to Milton Keynes, reducing congestion and helping support its continued growth".

I recently attended a consultation meeting organised by Highways England in Bicester. Between the M1 and the M40, the government has selected a route near to the proposed East-West rail link although the actual route is far from clear. This lack of clarity prevents them from objecting to planning applications to develop land on this route.

It may be that the selection of any route will, in 2019, become ever tougher and more expensive to realise. I raised this at the meeting but

Highways England seemed content to plod rather than look for an express way to deliver the route.

When questioned, a Highways England presenter baldly stated that it is possible that part of the Expressway near Milton Keynes might be single carriageway. I was shocked, frankly, and thought I had misheard.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, any new road taking traffic away from our ever more busy roads is a good thing. I just hope they do not attempt to rebrand parts of existing roads such as the A421 as the East West Expressway.

Another positive for Milton Keynes is the huge amount of investment coming in. Clearly the smart money feels that Milton Keynes is a vibrant, well connected, exciting city and well worth investing in. One new investment is the £150 million technology hub for Santander. There will also be a 256-bedroom Moxy by Marriott hotel, at the corner of Avebury Boulevard and South Fifth Street.

Nearby will be another huge investment led by Palmer Capital which is also behind the Moxy Hotel. This is Aubrey Place, a 300-flat 'Build to Rent' scheme. As the tallest new



Santander's planned £150m campus in Central Milton Keynes.

buildings in Milton Keynes, at 18 storeys, it will provide 'affordable on an average income' flats to rent only, in Central Milton Keynes near the station.

The new multi-storey car park near John Lewis at centre:mk has opened. The 250-bedroom with conference centre Hotel La Tour overlooking Campbell Park is soon to be completed and an Easyhotel inside Norfolk/Ashton House is due to welcome guests later this year.

The rental flat development on the former Wyvale garden centre site opposite Xscape will again underscore confidence in the future of Milton Keynes. Hermes, owner of centre:mk,

is looking to expand the grade II listed building on its flanks near John Lewis to match the rest of the building.

There really is much to look forward to this new year. And while I acknowledge that not all of it will be without issues or problems, my feeling is that on balance all the potential problems can be ameliorated with careful planning and oversight from Milton Keynes Council, our MPs and central government. They may require just the occasional well-aimed kick from us, the citizens of Milton Keynes, but it is just possible that the good will outweigh the bad in 2019.

Happy new year and cheerio.

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