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## A bridge over troubled planning waters

ONCE upon a time, under its Development Corporation, Milton Keynes enjoyed joined-up thinking. No planning was agreed until the effects of other nearby developments were first taken into consideration. And no humpback bridges very likely incapable of taking 18-wheel articulated lorries over railway lines between two very closely spaced roundabouts would even be considered without a proper, publically accessible feasibility study.

Sadly, those days appear to be gone.

In Milton Keynes Development Partnership we have a body charged with disposing of land sold by the Homes & Communities Agency to MKDP's owner Milton Keynes Council for £32 million back in January 2013. So far they have had few, if any, successes and been oft criticised for what they have done.

Now, after six years of apparent lethargy, they have girded their loins and are going 'hell-for-leather' to get monies rolling into their (and the council's) coffers. In their own words: "MKDP takes a commercial and entrepreneurial approach to sell and develop these assets with third party developers and investors, whilst ensuring full community and stakeholder engagement in the preparation of development briefs for the sites".

So that's all right then. Or is it?

Tailbacks

One planned development which may well cause unthought-through chaos is outlined in their 1.9-hectare (4.7 acres) Caldecotte Site C Development Brief showing housing, offices and possibly a hotel west of V10 Brickhill Street and bordering the railway line soon to be part of the restored and much busier East West Rail.

Across Brickhill Street, directly opposite Caldecotte Site C, a development which will definitely have an impact is Red Bull Racing's approved plans for change of use to form new access from Tilbrook roundabout, a car park, the permanent closure of Bradbourne Drive (have they really thought about potential tailbacks on the level crossing here?) and the erection of gatehouses, landscaping, and associated works.

Across the Bow Brickhill level crossing is a third and still bigger planned industrial development at South Caldecotte subsuming 57 hectares (140.8 acres) of farmland and likely to massively impact decisions taken in the Caldecotte Site C Development Brief. Draft plans by property developers Hampton Brook show similarly humongous warehouses to Magna Park but with just one access point on to and off what is currently a single carriageway. This potential white elephant is a problematic ten roundabouts or so away from the M1.

The consultation draft for the Caldecotte plan, which ended on April 29, had this to say: "Currently there is one passenger train per hour each way between Bedford and Bletchley on weekdays and Saturdays, the level crossing gates at Bow Brickhill are closed for 14-15

minutes per hour, more if a freight train uses the line. There are notable queues of traffic on Brickhill Street on both sides of the level crossing when the gates are closed and also along Station Road into Bow Brickhill, particularly during the morning and afternoon/evening rush hours. The number of passenger trains on the railway line is due to double in 2024 when the upgrade is complete. A solution to these delays is the provision of a bridge.

"Whilst Network Rail has no plans to provide such a bridge [*nor at Woburn Sands, as I have written on several occasions*], land can be safeguarded to enable a bridge to be provided at some future date. Feasibility work undertaken by the council suggests that a bridge could be constructed on the existing line of Brickhill Street, subject to more detailed technical work and planning permission. This would not require the safeguarding of any land within Caldecotte Site C."

A copy of that 'feasibility work' has been requested under Freedom of Information legislation but as yet with no result. The council's draft plan does seem to prevent anyone from Station Road turning right over the railway and one has to be sorry for the residents in the two houses at the end of Station Road who might be severely affected. Interestingly there is no elevation published. I wonder why. Did they lose it?

Reluctant

A bridge is an essential idea. Once the East West Rail line is opened, the existing level crossing will be closed at least 50 per cent of the time and likely even longer once freight trains between Southampton and Felixtowe join the route. But the land available is just far too small and I am certain both MKDP and Hampton Brook would be extremely reluctant to lose development land for a proper solution to crossing the railway to be built.

I have stood on the site and the 'feasibility work' plans are simply hard to accept. There is a complete lack of vertical sections to demonstrate how the road bridge could be constructed with acceptable gradients across the double-track railway and within the footprint shown.

Interestingly the adopted Walton Neighbourhood Plan, which featured meetings with MKDP, says this about the Caldecotte Site C: "This site is another part of the land bank owned by MKDP. The site is adjacent to the railway line and is potentially required to facilitate a bridge that will replace the nearby level crossing as part of the East West Rail upgrade. A Planning Statement should identify how the proposal will not preclude the delivery of a new railway crossing."

If access for the likely hundreds of 18-wheel articulated lorries per day is really to be over a hump-backed bridge on to a single carriageway V10 Brickhill Street, won't we all have fun?

So come on MKDP, show us the elevations. I can't wait. Cheerio.