

MEETING REPORTS

VICTORIA STATION UPGRADE

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Clubhouse on 9 October 2007

The Chairman began by introducing the three speakers in turn, being Glenn Keelan, Victoria Station Upgrade (VSU) Senior Project Manager, Kirsteen Dickson, VSU Consultation Manager, and Ewan McLean, VSU Design and Assurance Manager.

Glenn began the talk by giving a background outline of his career to date and what led him to be working as part of the VSU project. Then he explained that until a few years ago, the Victoria Station Upgrade was seen only as one component part of the Victoria Transport Interchange (VTI) project. But in early 2005 it became clear that the Victoria Line Upgrade would deliver more people than at present, per unit time through the station, and because the VTI planning was still very much in its infancy, the Transport for London board took the decision to extract the VSU underground station upgrade works from that project and to deal with them as a project in their own right.

The main reasons for extracting the project from TfL and bringing it solely into the LU family were the heavy congestion and station closure problems that the station regularly suffers from each day. 70 thousand people pass through the station during a peak 3 hour period Monday to Friday and numbers are rising during the Saturday AM as well, which is becoming a peak period in its own right. Things will only get busier and it is projected that by 2016 there will be 84 thousand people per three hour period, a 20% increase on today's figures. When the scheme is implemented, and is aided by the Crossrail and Thameslink schemes, the shelf life of the station, currently set at 2055 will leap to 2080; all these projects will help to ease congestion.

Then Glenn went on to describe the scope of the works and the reasons for doing them. He stated that congestion in the station is partly due to the tidal flow problem in the AM peak. 30 thousand people enter the station, 25 thousand exit the station, and a further 15 thousand attempt to interchange between the District and Circle (D&C) lines and the Victoria Line. The greater two of these three tidal flows are in direct conflict with each other, all trying to go through the same physical space at the same time. The VSU scheme is, Glenn said, based on the principle of 'divide and conquer' – in other words, moving one of these tidal flows elsewhere. To do this, a major civil engineering box is being constructed in Bressenden Place, and a new station exit created. The location was chosen because it is estimated that the vast majority of exiting passengers are heading for the north east of the station, up Victoria Street and towards Westminster. In addition to the new Northern Ticket Hall, the scheme allows for an enlarged Victoria Line ticket hall at the southern end of the site, 9 new escalators to allow access from the two ticket halls to an intermediate concourse at a level with the present D&C interchange passageway, and the installation of new passenger lifts is planned to allow step free access from street level to the Victoria Line platforms and from the Victoria Line to the D&C lines. The project does not contain the scope for direct lift access from the D&C ticket hall to the D&C platforms, but this is covered by another scheme, the D&C station upgrade, which is another component of the VTI project mentioned earlier.

Glenn then showed slides to the audience detailing the tasks to be undertaken during the VSU project. "We are looking to create a clean new asset focussing on

directions of flow, signage, visibility and accessibility” he said. He explained how there are plans to rationalise the confusing entrance stairs at Wilton Road, and how a Transport and Works Act order was to be submitted on 22 November 2007, because “a lot of what we are trying to build is on land we don’t own – we need this before we start”. He said that a public inquiry was planned for in June 2008, and a decision by Government expected by spring 2009, following which the contractors will begin work in October 2009 and complete five to six years later. “There are many constraints, including our own process, physical and highway constraints, and the need to manage the scheme against a vastly increasing number of environmental parameters and directives” he said.

Then Kirsteen began to speak, briefly sketching her background of involvement on the consultation team of many projects – “Only one of which has come to fruition, unfortunately”. She then went on to explain the reasons why consultation is necessary for such a project. “It’s not just a matter of best practice” she said. “We have a statutory requirement to consult, under the Transport and Works Order”. She told the audience how discussions had to be undertaken on an ongoing basis with the key stakeholders in the project, Land Securities (who own a lot of land in the area), the Victoria Palace Theatre (which is a listed building), Network Rail, and Westminster City Council. She stated that Westminster City Council is being particularly supportive. During two public exhibitions during May and July 2007 over 1,400 people visited and the general feedback was that the scheme was broadly welcome, the need for it was obvious and the implementation of it was long overdue. From the exhibitions 120 visitors filled out response sheets, each now having been individually acknowledged and the questions they contained addressed. 1,200 stakeholders get a regular project update, and various larger groups of these stakeholders, such as local hotels, and the John Lewis Partnership, have received briefings tailored particularly to address the impact of the scheme on their respective businesses.

Finally Ewan stepped forward, summarising his career to date and how it led to his present involvement in the scheme. Using three dimensional ‘CAD’ computerised drawings which were shown to the audience, Ewan highlighted the problems and features connected with the new development. One of the basic problems the station has is that “Network Rail trains are bigger than underground trains”. Each Network Rail train disgorges its passengers, the majority heading straight to the tube station, down escalator number three (the only down escalator from the Victoria line ticket hall,) and they then emerge onto the platform only to get bunched up at the south end because they cannot board trains all of which have filled up at the south end at the three previous stations. The platform crowding thus backs up to the escalator, which backs up into the ticket hall, and staff respond by firstly closing the ticket gates on entry, then the Bostwick gates at the station entrance. Thus a busy station shuts several times a day to allow crowds downstairs to disperse. Ewan explained that the scheme would solve this by ‘double ending’ the station. He said that the existing escalator heading for the Victoria Line platforms had reached capacity so this was clearly not sustainable for the future. Double ending the station creates a safety valve, another route to get to the north end of the platforms where trains are less crowded. The extension of the southern ticket hall, with three new escalators down to an intermediate level, then another three feeding directly to the northern end of the platforms, will alleviate the crush. Legion models, static models and pedroute models have all shown that this scheme is workable. New

passageways linking to the D&C are also planned, the ultimate aim is to utilise this as a one way system, to keep conflicting crowds apart. The northern ticket hall, beneath Bressenden Place means that huge crowds can exit the station without fighting their way across the traffic in Victoria Street and not contributing to the internal congestion of the station.

The northern ticket hall supports most of the business case for the whole scheme because it has been proved to generate significant benefits through journey time savings. The route out through the new ticket hall saves about 6 to 7 minutes time per person. Multiply that by 25 thousand people in the peak, at the top of the demand curve in 30-50 years time, and that is a lot of benefit. Through the diagrams of the station the audience were able to see how the different elements of the scheme fitted together. Ewan mentioned the problems of a sewer pipe which runs at a very shallow level right across the site in a cast iron pipe, and in fact crosses above the D&C lines. He also mentioned that the tunnelling method for new passageways is to be the sprayed concrete method, because the surrounding ground is so unstable that ground preparation, namely pumping loads of cement in to stabilise the ground prior to tunnelling, is necessary. Various slides were shown highlighting the complexity of existing services and the structure of the built environment around which the project must proceed.

Ewan then mentioned that one thing necessary to construct the station is the demolition of some buildings. The new northern ticket hall must be built in the middle of a main road, Bressenden Place. But this road is an arterial route between the East and West Congestion Charge zones, and cannot be closed as it is the only north-south route whereby drivers can avoid paying the charge. It has to be kept open, but the ticket hall box has also to be dug, so the only solution is to divert the road elsewhere and this requires the demolition of some buildings. The road has to go somewhere. Some buildings 'of no particular architectural merit' (according to English Heritage) on what Ewan referred to as the 'corner site' will be demolished once a compulsory purchase order has been obtained, and eventually a nicer building will be built to replace them once the ticket hall works are complete.

Then Ewan went on to mention the other enabling works needed before the main project can begin. These allow the contractors to get a nice clean start when they come to the main works. The enabling works include the removal of asbestos from the Victoria Underground station. Most station finishes have been removed to allow this, and over Christmas 2007 access to the Victoria Line platforms was closed for 16 days to allow the removal of a quantity of asbestos in a supporting beam above the escalators. In addition there are utilities to be diverted including a water main which runs right up the Wilton Road.

Glen then took the microphone and summarised the project for the audience. He said that, unlike many improvement projects that have been promoted and later abandoned, this was a real project, actually happening, with serious amounts of real money allocated by TfL to support it. There will be a lot of work and varying degrees of disruption, but ultimately it will be of benefit to the travelling public. He mentioned the close and supportive relationship that the project enjoys with one stakeholder, Land Securities, which has real aspirations for the commercial redevelopment of the area around the station, and also of another supportive stakeholder, Network Rail, which, in contrast has not yet really formalised its plans for the mainline station above the development. It is a case of working both with the known, and the yet

unknown, and of second guessing how best the VSU might fit in with any possible plans in the area.

Then questions were invited from the audience. They included a question about how the extra escalators and lifts would deliver massive amounts of people onto a platform where they would then have nowhere else to go. The speakers pointed out that the Victoria Line Upgrade was to deliver new trains with 16 per cent extra capacity and a more frequent 33 train per hour service which would be equal to the task of coping with the extra traffic through the station.

There was also a question regarding why sprayed concrete tunnelling methods had been chosen over the traditional cast iron segment. The speakers said that there were many reasons. One was the versatility of being able to open quarter or half an excavation face rather than a full face with cast iron. This was useful when there was ground instability, as a smaller excavation face presented less risk of ground movement during tunnelling. Also, the specifications for some of the new passenger tunnels required wishbone junctions to aid passenger flow, and you could connect one tunnel with another of the same size. With cast iron you cannot have 1 to 1 tunnel connection, you have to connect a larger to a smaller one, and the only kinds of junctions you can build with cast iron are at right angles. "With spray concrete you get a better passenger routing instead of lots of right angled tunnels that disorient people".

Another audience member asked whether any thought had been given to relocating Victoria Coach station to where it ought to be, Victoria. The speakers declined to comment as this was not part of the scope of the VSU or VTI projects but acknowledged that something needed to be done.

Another questioner asked "what function does a public inquiry serve except to get in the way of operations?". Once audience laughter had subsided, Kirsteen said that in a democracy you have to allow people to have their say. There are many people with interests to protect and the Transport and Works Act gives them a mechanism in which to do so, and an independent arbitrator to whom they can have recourse if dissatisfied with the proposals.

Following the audience questions, the Society Chairman invited those present to show their appreciation in the usual way.

Donald McGarr