

Swiss news : a miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

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SWISS NEWS

A miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

Swiss Infrastructure planning

Parliamentary approval is required for the next round of Federal investment in rail infrastructure, with some CHF3.5 billion planned to be invested in improvements by 2025. The measures planned are mostly local station and junction improvements with some tunneling and additional running lines, mainly to relieve the chronic overcrowding already expected between Lausanne and Geneva and Winterthur and Zürich. There will also be urgent measures to increase clearances on the Gotthard NEAT approach lines. Two projects are controversial. The Wisenberg Tunnel between Liestal and Olten is seen in northwest Switzerland as essential to secure capacity and reliability on this line which is also part of the north-south routes; the SBB and the Confederation are not impressed. Now the SBB has come up with the Chestenberg project for a high speed tunnel (to open in 2025) between Mellingen and Rapperswil on the Zürich-Olten line. This would cost CHF1.8 billion and eliminate the present long and slow detour via Lenzburg but it is not in the existing financial plan. The SBB suggest that the tunnel would yield a much better return on capital ultimately permitting a 15-minute 'Takt' between Zürich and Bern, taking 45 minutes instead of the present 56 minutes. Incidentally, this also implies raising speeds between Olten and Bern to 250 km/h. Further projects in this corridor, including improvements between Mellingen and Schlieren, are also attracting interest. This has raised a discussion on objectives. Switzerland is a small country; high speeds are not only attractive, but can permit step changes in productivity and capacity which are urgently needed. How fast, is however controversial. The debate, 'as fast as possible', or 'as fast as necessary', is more political than commercial and has not been resolved. Small infrastructure improvements are increasingly costly, whilst land use and amenities are factors needing consideration. Moreover, the question of paying both the infrastructure and operating deficits that has been referred to in earlier editions of Swiss Express, is not settled. Fare increases, levies on highway traffic and road fuel, are all in the debate.

Effretikon – Winterthur projects going ahead

The Federal government has recently approved CHF440m for infrastructure projects, of which CHF213m are for projects connected ultimately with the new chord line under Zürich station to Oerlikon. This includes a 4th track between Hürlistein and Effretikon, and from Tössmühle to Winterthur. This is the heaviest used part of the Zürich S-Bahn network, and the new line under Zürich, to open in two years, will add to the general activity. A flyover at Hürlistein is already being built, and by 2018 trains will run here on a two-minute headway. Widening from Effretikon to Tössmühle is scheduled for 2025.

BLT Tangos

After two years of proving trials, the delivery to Baselland Transport (BLT) of new Tango Trams from Stadler began in mid July. No 155 is the first of a batch of 15 in the first series order. BLT has said that although various adaptations were needed, the four prototypes have never suffered a serious breakdown. Compared to the 1970s design of the main fleet of trams, the Tangos have a 29% lower specific power consumption, partly due to regenerative braking that feeds the catenary with current generated by electric braking.



Pre-production BLT Tango in 2010. PHOTO: Bryan Stone

DB Freight train wreck

On the 20th May rail traffic in Switzerland was affected by a serious and destructive high speed freight train derailment at Müllheim, near Freiburg-im-Breisgau on the DB North-South main line down the Rhein valley. Seven wagons overturned, others derailed, and serious damage to the track and power supply closed this principal artery carrying freight for both the Gotthard and Lötschberg routes and ICE services to and from Zürich and Interlaken. The derailment involving a typical HUPAC intermodal load of containers and swap bodies had some alarming features. Some tanks of known hazardous cargo, one of which leaked causing widespread alarm and evacuation, had to be pumped out before site clearance could start. The cause is officially still not published, but it was announced that a section missing from a broken wheel observed at the site was found 12 km back, after a search of the track. HUPAC's wagons are overhauled in Bellinzona, where procedures for wheel set maintenance are also being examined.

Fortunately, no-one was hurt but the clearing up took a long time and inevitably passengers and freight were greatly delayed. The diversionary route was either via Singen to Zürich, or a laborious process with local shuttles and buses, to Basel Badischer Bhf. The parallel French route via Strasbourg-Mulhouse was not used. The DB line was closed completely for 52 hours, and double line working was only possible after 5 days.

Appenzeller Bahn

This year saw the centenary (celebrated on the 28th May) of the AB line from Altstätten to Gais, a backwater of the

former SGA that had some priceless features, now largely lost. In Altstätten, for example, until 1973 the SGA used to cross the road outside the Stadt station and go down the main street, then out through the meadows to the SBB's Altstätten, SG, station. Here it not only connected with main-line trains but also had a physical junction with the Rheintälische Strassenbahn (RhSt) which until its closure in 1954 ran along the valley floor to Heerbrugg serving several villages en-route. The crossing of the lonely high country above Altstätten is quite different to the gentle farmland of western Appenzell, but has the result that the line's continued existence is always being questioned. If readers get a chance, ride this section while you can. A bus connects through the town from Altstätten SBB to the AB terminus today. An original composition of rolling stock that served this line has been preserved by the Club 'Historische Appenzellerbahnen'. This comprises BCFeh 4/4 No 2 and its 3rd Class trailer C13. Also saved is one of the splendid heavy green trams (No 5) that used to frequent the SGA yard in St Gallen. These vehicles were out in the sunshine in May for the party.



TOP: Altstätten Stadt Station.

ABOVE: Descending from Gais to Altstätten Stadt.

PHOTOS: Tony Bagwell

The MOB dual-gauge coach

Thoughtful observers between Spiez, Bern, Olten and Luzern must have been very surprised on May 24, to see a MOB/GoldenPass metre-gauge coach running on their standard-gauge railway. Next day, after a nocturnal transfer over that elusive siding, hidden in the grass, which you see before the entrance, it was on display in the Verkehrshaus. The coach, BDs 220, has the experimental convertible bogies

for standard and narrow gauge. The event was a special occasion and the effort to move it to Luzern at least showed that serious progress has been made. It returned via Langnau and Thun.

RhB and Bergün

Several important grants from foundations have permitted work to take place on the Bahnmuseum Albula at Bergün station, much of it scheduled to be concluded in the coming months. It is now intended that the 1st June 2012 will be the opening day - another good reason to go and stay with our friends at the Grischuna in Filisur!

Domat-Ems sawmill to be dismantled

Swiss Express 107 had an article about the bankrupt industrial sawmill at Domat-Ems on which Graubünden, its foresters, the RhB and SBB, pinned such high hopes. In June the plant was put up for sale but only Klausner, a German company, made a bid. This was to dismantle the equipment for future use and clear the site. Egger, from the Tirol, would have taken-on the mill if an annual input of 300,000t of wood could have been guaranteed. Graubünden's foresters came up with a target of 160,000t, whilst nothing like this was offered from outside the Canton. This underlined the original fear that this huge, subsidised plant in Domat-Ems would distort the nationwide supply and demand of timber, an industry always closely connected to Swiss community life. The 22ha cleared site is to be offered for sale leasehold in September, however the land was originally protected woodland that was only released for development on the condition that a forestry-related industry would be installed. This one has really come home to roost, for the former woodland, the subsidies, the costs (including the elaborate rail connection), and the work for 130 people and business for the railways, are now all gone.

Further news on the DB North-South route

On July 14 the Swiss Federal Transport Department confirmed that Germany will definitely be unable to meet its obligation to rebuild the Rhein valley line to Basel in time for the opening of the NEAT Gotthard base tunnel now due to open at the end of 2016. The real test will be in 2020 when the Monte Ceneri tunnel is complete by which date Germany should also have completed its capacity and speed improvements, however opening of the improved German access route cannot now be expected before 2025. The cause of delay is the several thousand objections made in Germany by landowners and residents to the planned alignment.

For lovers of engines

Two events have contradicted our reports of disappearing engines. On the RhB, two accidents damaging Nos 612 and 649 (the latter hit a fallen tree), found the Ge4/4 I (600 series) survivors turned out in-extremis, with No 610 running a Glacier Express one day. On August 16 all four were on trains. This had not been planned. On SBB Cargo,

three Am6/6 engines (18500 series) have been hauled out of 'death row' to cover a shortage of heavy shunters. These are in Rekingen, Aarau and Zürich HB, the latter being 18503. Catch them if you can; it can't last.

141R 568

After reporting (SE107, P23) on the entry into service of 141R 1244 companion French loco 141R 568 is also now out of restoration and did a round-trip in May between Schaffhausen, Winterthur, Kreuzlingen and back to Schaffhausen. 141R 568 has been restored by DLM the company which, under Roger Waller, has developed high-efficiency steam engines to contemporary standards like 52 8055, also reported-on in SE.



Sister locomotive 141R 251 at Dole shed, in the 1960's served the Belfort and Pontarlierservices.

PHOTO: Bryan Stone

New Zürich Station

At a press visit to the Wiesenberg tunnel leading under Zürich HB to Oerlikon in October, it was announced that the 12 km tunnel will be opened in 2014. A new station, 'Zürich Löwenstrasse', under the existing Hauptbahnhof, will be served by Genève – Bern – Zürich – St Gallen trains plus S-Bahn trains on the Oerlikon line, avoiding the reversal necessary today in Zürich HB and saving several minutes journey time. Another main saving is in capacity in Zürich HB, releasing platforms for the steadily increasing S-Bahn demand. The tunnel excavation is now largely complete and the installation of tracks, signaling and all cables and systems will shortly start.

Another crash...

On the 6th October an S3, a Re4/4 II-hauled (11184) regional passenger train from Basel on the main line into Olten was struck by a two-car Kolibri EMU operating the S9 Sissach – Olten via Läuelfingen service over the original Hauenstein route resulting in three injured people. The loco driver was seriously injured as the Re4/4 II was lifted and thrown sideways, causing quite severe damage. Investigation showed that the driver of the S9 had passed at danger the home signal and although the pre-1939 Integra train-stop

system worked there was insufficient safety over-run to prevent the collision. The current resignalling programme had yet to reach this junction.


Weather disruption

Between the 7th and 9th October heavy rain and snow, then a sudden rise in temperature, resulted in major flooding and considerable damage to some sections of railway. On the old Lötschberg main line the Kander river wreaked havoc first in the Gasterntal (above Kandersteg), then in the valley step between Kandersteg and Blausee. Roads and railway lines were demolished and the railway closed for 14 days. No buses could run, so Kandersteg could only be reached from Brig. South of the mountains in the Lötschental above

Goppenstein the road, and many buildings, were buried by slides or carried away by the river with disruption to the PostAuto service. The Zweilütschinen – Lauterbrunnen line of the BOB was also carried away, as well as the road in the Lütschental. Four days after the flood the Brünig line between Meiringen and Brienz was still blocked, as were the Engelberg – Buochs, Zweisimmen – Lenk lines. Zweilütschinen – Grindelwald got away lightly being only closed for one day. The newly opened section of the DFB was apparently also affected by washouts. This was a serious round of incidents, which occurred almost without warning. These are getting conspicuously more frequent

(the last extreme one was in August 2005) and always more fierce, just the pattern which the experts tell us now to expect with climate change. At higher levels the once-frozen ground is no longer stable, and heavy (and warmer) rainfall is occurring above the protective tree line. Switzerland and other mountain countries with their infrastructure are increasingly vulnerable.

Fares increase announced

On P20 of SE 106 an article noted the growing perception that some concessionary fares (the General Abonnement - GA - annual network season ticket, for example) were now being used by long-distance commuters to get very cheap rides. Overall revenue is falling behind the demands for new infrastructure and greater capacity. Fare increases this December do not tackle these problems head-on, but the GA 1st Cl. goes up by 3.9% to CHF5,350 (probably still a lot cheaper than many long distance "seasons" in Britain, and you get the whole network thrown in); ordinary tickets go up by 3% only in 1st class, so the differential increases to 1.7 to 1. Overall this is a holding operation, and concessions, for example for seasonal tourist traffic, remain very generous. An all-line GA for my dog Bramble goes up by 2.9% from CHF700 to CHF720. Much more of that and I'll leave her tied up outside the station (with all the others) when I take the train in future! 

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone.