

## Tolls increase to 40p: a turning point?

The Secretary of State for Transport has announced that the tolls on the Whitchurch Toll Bridge will double to 40p. The objectors have lost and we will all have to pay the extra tolls. But is that the end of the matter? Has the increase come about because, to quote Geoff Weir, “the objectors didn’t have any good arguments”? Or will the increase lead to more demands for the bridge’s current status to change?

The inquiry back in June 2009 covered a lot of the issues in detail. The Whitchurch Bridge Company was obliged to reveal much information that had previously been kept secret. The parish, district, county councillors and both local MPs, as well as TollFreeze.com, all made their case. But in the end, for the objectors, it came down to one problem: the Whitchurch Bridge Act of 1988.

This was a private Act of Parliament, put through by the Whitchurch Bridge Company, which made a number of significant changes in the way the 300-year-old bridge was run. The biggest change was that the shareholders could take a dividend based on the total value of the operation, not just on the money they had invested, as was the case before the Act. This means that despite the fact that their main asset is now near the end of its life, and the cost of the replacement is soaring, the Whitchurch Bridge Company shareholders get a larger and larger return on their investment – funded by the increased tolls.

The inquiry inspector’s report states that he agrees with the objectors, in that the current law is illogical. But the inspector had to apply the law as it stands.

The current situation was foreseen right back in 1988, when the Act was before Parliament. The Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council objected to the bill. Unfortunately, rather than ask for a change to the bill, the Parish Council accepted a compromise. They agreed instead, to a discount for local residents and the right to be consulted on future toll increases. This agreement, though, lasted only to the next toll increase. At that point the Whitchurch Bridge Company insisted on further compromises to continue the agreement. And then again, at the next increase, the same thing happened. Now there is no such agreement. The Whitchurch Bridge Company has the full benefit of the Act unencumbered by concessions.

Since 1988, the people who are unhappy with the Whitchurch Bridge Company have been split into two camps: those wanting a bigger local discount, and those wanting Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to take over the bridge. That no longer applies. The local discount is dead. The Whitchurch Bridge Company refuses to allow it. Therefore there is only one way to change the current situation: for OCC to step in.

Furthermore, there is another reason why OCC should act. Part of the reason for the current large increase in tolls is that the plans to rebuild the bridge have been drawn up so late, leaving little time to raise the money. OCC Bridge Department has acted as a paid consultant, advising on the future rebuilding. The fact that the estimates have shot up so late in the day, too late to pay for them without the big toll increase, is entirely their fault. At the inquiry the OCC engineer admitted that detailed plans could have been drawn up sooner. The council has acted for the Whitchurch Bridge Company rather than discharge its legal or democratic responsibility.

Our local OCC representative, David Sexon, has said he supports our case. So has our MP, John Howell. It is now time for all to unite to press the case to OCC. Make no mistake, this will not happen overnight. Councils act slowly, with five-year plans. So we must make our case now, and keep it up over several years.

The Whitchurch Bridge Company may have won the right to raise the tolls to 40p, but they have also united the opposition to the toll bridge. People will look back to the 2009 inquiry, and say that this was the day the tide turned.

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