

**PUBLIC INQUIRY - 2<sup>nd</sup> JUNE 2009**  
**APPLICATION TO INCREASE THE TOLLS AT WHITCHURCH**  
**BRIDGE**

**Witness statement by Geoffrey Weir**

**Introduction**

1. My name is Geoffrey Weir. I am a Chartered Engineer, and a Member of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers. I am the Clerk to the Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge.
2. The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge is a Company by Statute established under The Whitchurch Bridge Acts of 1792 and 1988. The legislative framework is set out in Appendix A of the Statement of Reasons.
3. The Company's principal obligation is to provide and maintain at all times a safe and reliable crossing across the Thames between Whitchurch-on-Thames and Pangbourne.
4. The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge is managed by a Committee of three members – Mr Michael Beckley, who is Chairman, Mr Patrick FitzGerald, and myself as Clerk.
5. There are four shareholders in The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge - Whitchurch Bridge (One) Ltd., Whitchurch Bridge (Two) Ltd., Whitchurch Bridge (Three) Ltd. and Whitchurch Bridge (Four) Ltd. These Companies are wholly owned subsidiaries of Whitchurch Bridge (Holdings) Ltd., the Directors of which are Mr Michael Beckley, who is Chairman, Mr Patrick FitzGerald, Mr Charles Micklem, Mr Robert Plumb, and myself as Company Secretary. Mr Beckley, Mr FitzGerald and myself are executive Directors, Mr Micklem and Mr Plumb are non-Executive Directors. Whitchurch Bridge (Holdings) Ltd is a private Company with 51 shareholders.

**Communications**

6. The Company is aware of the need to communicate with the local community as effectively as possible. It has developed an informative website, arranges meetings with local Parish Councils, and submits articles to local Parish magazines. Appendix C of Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Company's management of Communications.

**Utility and the Community**

7. The Bridge is an important physical feature and carries the B471 highway between Pangbourne in West Berkshire and Whitchurch-on-Thames in Oxfordshire. There are approximately 2 million crossings by road vehicles per annum, or 6,000 per weekday. The Bridge has a structural weight limit of 7.5 tonnes mgw.
8. The Company is mindful of the fact that the Bridge is a valuable and important utility for local residents and others who rely on the Bridge to cross the Thames. The Company is also part of the local community through both the employment opportunities it provides and the support it gives to local organisations. The Company relies for its income on the drivers of motor vehicles choosing to use the Bridge, and is mindful of the fact that the level of Tolls and the process of paying Tolls are influencing factors. Appendix B of the Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Utility of the Bridge to the local community.

## **Bridge Card Discount System**

9. The Company operates a discount system for local residents and other regular users of the Bridge using "Bridge Cards". Bridge Cards are swipe cards which users can preload with credit for crossings. The current discounted rate) gives 36 crossings for a £5 top-up, which equates to 13.89p per crossing (increased from 12.5p as from 16<sup>th</sup> February 2009). This represents a discount of just over 30% on the cash Toll.
10. There are currently 6.650 Bridge Cards in use. When ownership was last analysed in August 2007, 60% of registered Bridge Card users lived locally in the RG8 postcode area.
11. Bridge Card uses account for approximately 50% of all Bridge crossings. At the current Bridge Card discount rate of 13.89p, the average Toll paid is approximately 16.9p. For the current financial year as a whole we expect average Toll paid to be 16p, and Toll Revenue to be about £284,000.

## **Operations Management**

12. The Company manages its operations to maintain efficiency in Toll collection and to minimise "leakage". Toll revenue, collection efficiency, wages and other costs are monitored and controlled through a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) system. Appendix D of the Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Company's management of Operations.
13. The Company has thus been able to keep its regulated Tolls as low as possible, whilst maintaining substantial discounts to local residents and other regular users through its Bridge Card system. The Bridge Card system also speeds up and simplifies the Toll paying process for Bridge users, and reduces operating costs.

## **Basis of the Toll Application**

14. The Company has a statutory duty under its Acts to maintain at all times a safe and reliable crossing across the Thames between Whitchurch-on-Thames and Pangbourne, and its Acts empower the Company to raise sufficient revenue from its Tolls to meet this duty. Appendix A of the Statement of Reasons gives more details of the legislative framework within which the Company acts.
15. The Company's professional engineering advisers – The Oxfordshire County Council Bridges Department (OCC) - have advised the Company that the current 107-year-old Bridge should be reconstructed by 2015. The Company assesses risk in this area on a continuous basis, and, in the light of professional advice, have planned for Bridge reconstruction in 2013 - 2014.
16. The costs of Bridge reconstruction have increased very substantially over the last 5 years as a result of a more detailed and specific engineering assessment, and total £3.22m at today's prices. At the time of the last toll application in 2004 the comparable cost estimate was £1.26m.
17. The current level of tolls is not sufficient to enable the Company to meet its obligations as specified in the Whitchurch Bridge Act 1792 and the Transport Charges &c (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1954, as modified by the Whitchurch Bridge Act 1988
18. The Company therefore assesses that only increases in the vehicle tolls can produce the income required to meet its obligations, and that a 40p cash toll is required to build up the Bridge Replacement Fund (RF) from its current £1.4m to the target £2.9m by 2013, when the Bridge reconstruction cost is forecast to be £4.1m. The gap of £1.2 million between the RF and the Bridge reconstruction cost is planned to be funded by affordable borrowing over a minimum of 15 years. The 40p cash toll proposed is assessed as sufficient to cover this period also.

## **Planning Permission**

19. The Company has run its funding model based on the key assumptions given in paragraph 4.8 of the Toll Application. Mr Beckley's evidence deals with the financial assumptions used, but I wish to draw attention to paragraph 4.8.5, which states:

*"Planning permission and listed building consent will be sought and obtained in 2010 for the planned reconstruction works as described in Appendix 2"*

20. The Company has met with Planning officers from South Oxfordshire District Council (the local Planning authority), and from the discussions at these meetings believes that its proposed design (the General Arrangements of which are shown in Appendix J of the Statement of Reasons) will fulfil Planning requirements. This is the assumption used in the funding model. However, the Company is aware of the unpredictability of the Planning process and the risk that it may add costs and delays to the reconstruction of the Bridge because of requirements to amend the design and/or the construction process.

## **3 tonne Weight Limit**

21. Some objectors have asserted that reconstruction could be postponed if a 3 tonne mgw weight limit were imposed. The Company believes that a weight limit as low as 3 tonnes would unacceptably reduce the utility of the Bridge. Each weekday, between the hours of 7.00 am and 7.00 pm, approximately 55 vehicles in excess of 3 tonnes cross the Bridge, including:
- the local bus service 142 from Woodcote to Reading via Pangbourne (11 times per day on weekdays)
  - the coach from Burghfield Mini Coaches that transports children between Whitchurch Hill and Whitchurch Primary School (twice per day in term time)
  - larger minibuses (ie 16 seaters) from the Oratory School and Oratory Preparatory School transporting sports teams to away matches (most weekends in term time) and educational trips, and larger minibuses from visiting sports teams.
  - horseboxes used by local horse owners
  - larger local delivery vehicles (eg John Lewis)
  - certain local builders etc lorries (eg Lusted)
22. The Company believes that the prohibition of these vehicles would cause unreasonable inconvenience to those affected by the prohibition of these vehicles.
23. The Company is advised by OCC that a 3 tonne weight limit would be difficult to enforce. The Bridge would thus be exposed to the risk of structural damage from overweight vehicles, a risk that the Company is not prepared to take.
24. A 3 tonne weight limit would not put off the requirement to carry out major structural works by 2015 including waterproofing of the deck, repainting, and remedial work on the pier caps. Nor would it do anything to address the fundamental load assessment and risk management issues affecting the Bridge.

## **Insurance and Risk**

25. The Company insures itself against Employer's and Public Liability associated with the Bridge, also against Property Damage.
26. A condition of this insurance is that the Company must "maintain the premises, machinery, plant and equipment in a satisfactory state of repair" and that it "takes all reasonable precautions to prevent loss or destruction of or damage to the property insured".
27. The Company believes that it is prudent to follow the advice and recommendation of its engineering advisers OCC to ensure that this condition is met.

## **Statutory Process for Advertising the Toll Application**

28. Public Notices advertising this Toll Application were published in accordance with the requirements of the Secretary of State for Transport.
29. The Secretary of State for Transport received approximately 270 objections to the Company's Toll Application, and in accordance with S 6 (5) of the 1954 Act ordered that a Public Inquiry be held on 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009.
30. Public Notices advertising the Public Inquiry were published in accordance with the requirements of the Secretary of State for Transport.
31. The Company's Statement of Reasons and List of Documents have been published on its website since 11<sup>th</sup> May 2009, and a hard copy has been available in Pangbourne Library since 11<sup>th</sup> May 2009.
32. I confirm that the statutory duties of the Company relating to the submission of its Toll Application dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 2008, including the placing of Public Notices relating to the Toll Application and the Public Inquiry, have been properly fulfilled.

## **Conclusion**

33. The Company believes that its Application for an increase in tolls to 40p is fully justified and is neither more nor less than is required to carry out its obligations. It requests that this increase is recommended by the Inspector and agreed by the Secretary of State for Transport.

Geoffrey Weir  
Clerk to the Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge  
12th May 2009