

Borders rail link could cut 530,000 road trips



A train at Gorebrige in the days of steam. Picture: Robert Fairburn

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THE new Borders rail line is set to cut car journey numbers by more than half-a-million every year, according to a new report.

The latest analysis of the business case for the £300 million project to reopen the Waverley route from Edinburgh to Tweedbank, near Galashiels, calculated the rail link will boost tourism and cut road accidents due to fewer car journeys.

In all, it was estimated the value of the new line's benefits would be 30 per cent more than the cost of the venture.

The study said that despite delays in housebuilding projects along the route, the opportunity to commute by train to Edinburgh will increase the appeal of living in the Borders and Midlothian and ease pressure on the Capital.

The report said the project was still on course to meet its objectives of improving access between the Scottish Borders, Midlothian and Edinburgh, fostering social inclusion, preventing population decline in the Borders and encouraging people to switch from cars to public transport.

It said: "The opening of the railway is forecast to reduce the number of annual car trips along the route approximately by 530,000."

The lower traffic level on the roads is expected to prevent approximately 360 accidents over the next 60 years, saving around £4.6m.

The report said the railway would also benefit the 21 per cent of the population in the Borders who do not have a car.

The Borders and Midlothian together comprise a population of nearly 200,000 without direct access to a railway, in contrast to the Highlands, with a population of 220,000, which has 58 stations.

The report estimated the Borders rail link will see 647,136 return journeys on the 35-mile route in its first year of operation, 2015. That figure is lower than previous estimates, but the report said a development of 4000 houses at Shawfair had stalled due to the recession, with work only due to begin later this year at the earliest, removing around 60,000 journeys from the projections for the first five years.

Rail consultant and author David Spaven, who has long campaigned for the reopening of a Borders rail route, said the projections were probably an underestimate of likely rail traveller numbers.

He said: "There has been a tendency to be over pessimistic about the number of passengers who will use the new railway and we know from experience that many rail reopening schemes have done enormously better than forecast.

“Because of the limits of modelling, it probably doesn’t pick up on what the railway can do in terms of tourism – with the massive number of tourists in Edinburgh looking for other things to do, there is scope for attracting them to Sir Walter Scott country – Tweedbank is just a mile from Abbotsford. I doubt whether that has been factored in.”

Mr Spaven also said it was easy to overlook the benefits which the project would bring to Midlothian.

“When you look at the level of development already happening and planned to happen in Midlothian, it is putting enormous pressure on the roads into and within Edinburgh. Having a train service every half hour from Gorebridge, Newtongrange, Eskbank and Shawfair will offer a civilised alternative to congested roads.”

A Transport Scotland spokesman said: “We are delivering a railway for the people of the Borders for the first time in over 40 years.

“It will create up to 400 jobs during construction and will also help the population of Midlothian and the Scottish Borders, who are less well represented in the higher-earning professions, to gain access to employment in sectors with higher average wages helping to increase social mobility with the undoubted benefits that will bring for both the local and wider Scottish economy.”

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