

North Wales suffering from delays in road and rail upgrades, AMs warn

A row has broken out as assembly members accuse ministers of failing to tackle delays in road and rail projects to boost the north Wales economy.

Stalled improvements to the Wrexham-Chester rail line and the A494 Aston Hill bottleneck are cited in a letter sent by AMs to the first minister.

North Wales AM Aled Roberts said the region was overlooked for major development projects.

The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) said local firms were suffering.

Seven miles (11km) of single rail track is due to be doubled between Wrexham and Saltney Junction, part of a £36m Welsh government-funded project to improve the journey time between north and south Wales.

It would allow trains to travel up to 90mph (114km/h) in sections.

The work was due to be finished by early 2015 but Transport Minister Edwina Hart is now reviewing the plans following delays, and local councillors have said they feared the scheme was in "limbo".

An assembly committee which scrutinises First Minister Carwyn Jones has now written to him to express its disappointment over the lack of progress.

It said the scheme would provide "opportunities for significant economic development", and ministers needed to press Network Rail to provide a clear timetable for when the work would take place.

David Melding AM, chair of the committee, said members "would like to see ministers show leadership and clarity of purpose in bringing this scheme forward as soon as possible".

The committee also called for more action to deal with road bottlenecks, in particular at the A494 Aston Hill which together with the A55 it cited as being a "vital gateway to Wales".

Bottlenecks

Mr Roberts, who is not on the committee, welcomed its findings, saying north Wales was not being given priority by ministers in Cardiff Bay.

"When you look at infrastructure announcements over the years, it is more than clear that north Wales does not receive its fair share of expenditure for capital projects," he said.

"Despite making up over a fifth of Wales' population, our region is far too often overlooked.

"The first minister has acknowledged that the re-doubling of the Wrexham to Saltney Junction railway line will aid economic development across the region. Yet time and time we have seen delays."

Mike Learmond, regional development manager for FSB North Wales, said investment in road and rail links was essential to support growth in the economy of north Wales.

"It is vital that the Welsh government considers the needs of all parts of Wales and seeks to tackle as many pinch points within our transport infrastructure as possible in a targeted and cost-effective manner," he said.

"It is not just problems over rail which are of concern to our north Wales members. Many are concerned about the issue of bottlenecks on the A55 expressway and the impact that has on both commuters and those travelling on work-related journeys."

A Welsh government spokesperson said the first minister would consider the scrutiny committee's recommendations and would respond in due course.

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