

PUBLIC INQUIRY – 19th MAY 2015
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 Document 9 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 Robert Plumb, and myself.
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 Charles Micklem, Mr Robert Plumb, and myself as Company Secretary. Mr Beckley, Mr Plumb and myself are executive Directors, Mr Micklem is a non-Executive Director. Whitchurch Bridge (Holdings) Ltd is a private Company with 52 shareholders.

Engineering Consultants

6. In 1997 the Company appointed Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) as its consultant in engineering matters relating to the Toll Bridge.

Insurance and Risk

7. The Company insures itself against Employer's and Public Liability associated with the Bridge, also against Property Damage.
8. 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".
9. Our insurers expect us to follow the advice and recommendations of its engineering advisers OCC to ensure that this condition is met, and this we do.

Utility and the Community

10. 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 1.6 million crossings by road vehicles per annum, or 5,000 per weekday. The Bridge has an environmental weight limit of 7.5 tonnes mgw.
11. 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. Document 10 of our Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Utility of the Bridge to the local community.

Communications

12. The Company is aware of the need to communicate with the local community as effectively as possible. Document 11 of our Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Company's Management of Communications.

Management of Toll Collection

13. The Company manages its operations to maintain efficiency in Toll collection. Toll revenue, collection efficiency, wages and other costs are monitored and controlled through internal control processes which include audits of each Toll Collector shift. Document 12 of our Statement of Reasons gives more details of the Company's Management of Toll Collection.
14. The Company has 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.
15. As at 23rd April 2015, we had issued 11,000 Bridge Cards since they were introduced in 2006. Since the Bridge re-opened in September 2014 4,600 of these - about 42 % - have not been used and it is reasonable to assume that some or most of these have been lost.
16. Of the 6,700 Bridge Cards that have been registered, 3415 – about 50 % - are registered to our local RG8 postcode. However, of the 276,000 Card crossings by registered Card users since we re-opened, 157,000 – about 57 % - have been made by RG8 users.
17. Bridge Card uses account for approximately 53% of all Bridge crossings. With the current cash Toll at 40p and the Bridge Card Toll of 29.4, the average Toll paid is about 34p.
18. After re-opening crossings picked up more slowly than were expecting and it wasn't until March 2015 that we were back to where we expected to be. For the current financial year ending 30th June 2015 we expect there will be 1,080,000 crossings, with Toll Revenue of £352,000.

Basis of the Toll Application

19. 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. Document 9 of the Statement of Reasons gives more details of the legislative framework within which the Company acts.
20. On the advice of the Bridge was reconstructed in 2013-2014. The need to reconstruct the Bridge was examined in some detail at the 2009 PI.

21. Details of the Management of the Bridge Reconstruction are given in Document 13 of our Statement of Reasons. This document sets out how this project was planned and managed, and the events that led to the project over-running on both time and budget. In addition, Mr M Brain of OCC will cover these points in his witness statement.
22. At the time of the 2008 Toll Application the estimated cost (at 2008 prices) of the reconstruction works was £3.22 million incl VAT, and this was used as the basis for seeking a Class 1 Toll increase to 40p.
23. The actual cost of the reconstruction works (at 2014 prices) was £6.5 million incl VAT. Borrowings of £3.3 million (£2.8 million bank, £500k unsecured loan stock) have been taken out to fund the works, and these have to be repaid from Toll revenue.
24. The costs of Bridge reconstruction have thus increased substantially. 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
25. The Company therefore assesses that only an increase in Tolls can produce the income required to meet its obligations, and that a Class 1 Toll of 60p and a Class 2 Toll of £4 is required to repay the borrowings and then to build up the Bridge Replacement Fund to finance the next Bridge in 100 years' time.

Statutory Process for Advertising the Toll Application

26. Public Notices advertising this Toll Application were published on 20th November 2014 in accordance with the requirements of the Secretary of State for Transport, and details are in Document 5 of our Statement of Reasons.
27. The Secretary of State for Transport received 24 objections to the Company's Toll Application within the statutory consultation period, and in accordance with S 6 (5) of the 1954 Act ordered that a Public Inquiry be held. This was fixed for 19th May 2015.
28. Public Notices advertising the Public Inquiry were published on 23rd April 2015 in accordance with the requirements of the Secretary of State for Transport, and details are in Document 5 of our Statement of Reasons. .
29. The Company's Toll Application has been published on its website since 5th November 2014. Its Statement of Reasons has been published on its website since 24th April 2015, and a hard copy has been available in Pangbourne and Woodcote libraries since 24th April 2015
30. I confirm that the statutory duties of the Company relating to the submission of its Toll Application dated 5th November 2014, including the placing of Public Notices relating to the Toll Application and the Public Inquiry, have been properly fulfilled.

Conclusion

31. The Company believes that its Application for an increase in tolls to 60p 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
16th May 2015