

BARKING-GOSPEL OAK LINE USER GROUP

www.barking-gospeloak.org.uk

October 2007 Newsletter

On the Threshold of a Brave New World.....

Just over a month to go until the handover to Transport for London (TfL) on November 11th, and already the signs of change are evident, with ticket machines and Oyster readers appearing at stations along the line. At present the machines will only accept card transactions, as arrangements for emptying them of cash are not yet in place, and Oyster Pay-As-You-Go will not be valid until November 11th. A random check indicates that the machines can issue tickets to anywhere in the country, from the mightiest city terminus to the most obscure rural halt – though for discounted tickets (eg advance Apex fares) you may have to go to a station with a booking office. Tickets are still being issued on the train (assuming the conductor is able or inclined to do it) and penalty fares do not apply on our line at present, though TfL intend to introduce these fairly soon after they take over. We have stressed the need for a breaking-in period during which discretion will be exercised – after so many years of erratic or non-existent fare collection (including instances of people trying to pay on the train and being refused!) it would be quite unreasonable to switch to a zero-tolerance policy overnight. We have also voiced concern that certain stations only appear to be getting one machine, and we can foresee problems with queues and delays, especially on Monday mornings.

More Timetable Improvements in December

The December timetable will include some very welcome improvements including: Saturday services enhanced to match Mon-Fri frequencies; later last-train times from Gospel Oak (and from Barking too on Sundays – we are pressing for a later Mon-Sat last train too); an earlier start-up on Sunday mornings; and infilling the remaining one-hour gaps on Sunday evenings. Full details will be announced shortly.

Overcrowding

This is becoming more and more of a problem during the peaks as the line increases in popularity – and this is before TfL take over. The publicity and razzamataz that that will generate, including the line appearing on the Tube map from this November, is bound to make the situation worse. We have urged TfL and their contractor MTR Laing to address this problem, and have submitted a draft timetable for their consideration which would offer a 15-minute service in the main peaks using existing resources. London TravelWatch have backed us fully and have put in their own submission to this effect - we are very grateful indeed for their support, which was crucial in getting the original crowd-busting relief trains added to the half-hourly trains a couple of years ago. Even when the new trains are introduced in December 2009, under current plans these will still only be two coaches long with an option to add a third at a later date. Those coaches will be slightly longer than the present ones, and will carry more standing and fewer seated passengers, but we believe peak-time overcrowding will still be a problem unless they are made three-coach trains from the outset. Of course, we ought to be seeing electrification as part of the forthcoming upgrade, but regrettably (due to twisted official logic) that is not on the immediate agenda. We and others will continue to lobby strongly for this to be brought forward.

What About Bikes?

A good question. TfL have said the existing cycle policy will apply – but what exactly is it? To cut a long story short, the original Silverlink policy (no bikes on peak-time

trains between Blackhorse Road and Gospel Oak) is still theoretically in existence, but has never been enforced – mainly because it was controversially sneaked through a couple of years ago without proper consultation, isn't logical, and is unworkable in practice. Following protests, Silverlink deferred it and carried out a consultation exercise, which concluded that although bike restrictions might be acceptable on specific very-busy trains, blanket bans (from x time to y time) were inappropriate and unnecessary. However, that modification to the policy was never enacted and the whole thing got shelved. Given TfL's strongly pro-cycling stance, this issue will need very careful handling if a PR embarrassment is to be avoided. Looking further ahead, the new trains will have no designated cycle spaces.

(Mis)Information Systems

Passengers have become increasingly frustrated in recent weeks by (a) an unwelcome rash of disruptions and cancellations and (b) the way the line's information systems have a habit of blithely asserting that everything is running to time with no major delays. On one occasion the Secretary had to contact Control and tell THEM what was going on, which is not the way round things are supposed to work. The problem appears to be that disruption information is not always passed promptly from Operations Control to Retail Control, who are the ones who then have to pass it on to the hapless passenger stuck on an unstaffed platform. Silverlink have pledged to address this issue during their remaining tenure, and better information systems must be a priority for the new regime. (Not least monitor screens which are kept clean and legible) The fact that the new operators plan to staff all stations from Day One from first train to last should be a major step forward in this and other respects – always assuming Control themselves have up-to-the-minute information to pass onto the station staff.....

Walthamstow Pedestrian Link

Progress remains frustratingly snail-like on the long-awaited and much-needed short-cut pedestrian link between Queens Road and Central stations. Those with long memories will recall that the construction of this link was a condition of allowing Exeter Road estate to be built about a decade ago; the developer reneged on that condition and has since tried every trick in the book to wriggle out of it. The Council is continuing to press the issue via the appropriate channels. And we are delighted to hear that the draft redevelopment plan for central Walthamstow includes a direct pedestrian link between the ludicrously-misnamed Queens Road station and the High Street shopping area. Maybe at long last the station will then be given a more appropriate name – like Walthamstow Market!

Date of Next Meeting

We don't normally meet in November, but we felt we needed to slot in an extra one to give the new operators a chance to attend early on following their takeover – so the next meeting date is **Tuesday 27th November**, 7 15 pm at Barking Town Hall. We hope that representatives from TfL and MTR Laing will be able to attend, to introduce themselves to their new users and update everyone with the latest news!

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