

PRESS RELEASE

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For immediate use

CAMPAIGNERS FEAR MINISTERIAL “CAVALIER” ATTITUDE TOWARDS FORTHCOMING PUBLIC LOCAL INQUIRY (PLI) ON ABERDEEN BYPASS

Campaigners welcome forthcoming arrangements for AWPR PLI

But warn that PLI may be “nothing more than a shallow PR exercise”

Campaigners brand Minister as “cavalier” and AWPR information as “unreliable”

And warn that Ministers may u-turn on First Minister’s commitment on PLI decision

Campaigners from Road Sense, ⁽¹⁾ the community campaign against the proposed Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR), ⁽²⁾ today (Wednesday 19 March 2008) reacted to answers to questions and comments made by the Scottish Government’s Transport Minister, Stewart Stevenson MSP, during general question time at the Scottish Parliament last week – on Thursday 13 March 2008 ⁽³⁾.

Forthcoming arrangements for AWPR PLI

Responding to the Minister’s statement that the Scottish Government: “are making arrangements for the PLI” into the AWPR, and: “hope to announce shortly a date for the pre-inquiry meeting”, Henry Irvine Fortescue from Road Sense said:

“We welcome these arrangements, and we look forward to having the opportunity to make our case at the PLI. We have strong, compelling, factual arguments against the new road as it is currently proposed, and we are looking forward to the opportunity to expose the many flaws and half truths in the arguments that have been put forward in promoting the AWPR project.”

PLI may be “nothing more than a shallow PR exercise”

In response to a question from Brian Adam MSP, the Minister stated: “I am confident that, overall, we will make the necessary progress and be able to proceed with the whole [AWPR] plan. We will see what the objectors have to say to the inquiry and what conclusions the reporter reaches. There will be several ways to deal with the outcome when we know it”. Commenting on this, William Walton from Road Sense said:

“The Minister has stated that he is confident that he will be able to proceed with the AWPR project before any PLI has even been scheduled or announced. This suggests that his mind is already made

up and that the road will go ahead anyway – regardless of any recommendations from the PLI. If this is the case, the PLI will be nothing more than a shallow PR exercise. Those of us who have objected to the AWPR as currently proposed need some reassurance from the Minister that our concerns will be both listened to and taken on board at the PLI.”

Mr Walton added: *“The Minister is being cavalier in his apparent disregard for the purpose and procedures of the PLI, and disrespectful of due process. This seems to me to be the latest instance of Scottish Ministers overstepping the mark and involving themselves too closely in planning issues that should be allowed to take their course through the proper channels.”*

Ministers may u-turn on the First Minister’s commitment on PLI decision

In response to a question from Mike Rumbles MSP seeking confirmation that the Scottish Government will abide by the PLI's recommendations (a commitment that was given to Road Sense campaigners by First Minister, Alex Salmond MSP), the Minister stated: *“...the decision must be made by ministers, and of course ministers will make that decision”*. Commenting on this, Tony Hawkins from Road Sense said:

The Minister seems unable to confirm that he will live up to the commitment made to us by the First Minister – that Scottish Government Ministers will abide by the PLI's recommendations. This suggests that the Minister may be willing to ignore the recommendations of the PLI, and break Alex Salmond’s promise to us. The First Minister, and his Ministers, need to keep this promise to us and abide by the PLI's recommendations.”

Funding the AWPR – “a cavalier response”

In response to a question from Lewis Macdonald MSP on how the AWPR will be funded, the Minister stated: *“The route will be funded with money”* [sic], adding: *“Funding is unlikely to be relevant to the inquiry”*. Commenting on this, Sheona Warnock from Road Sense said:

“Great – the AWPR will be funded with “money”! That’s very funny given that Aberdeen City Council, one of the AWPR project’s funding partners, hasn’t got any! In supplying such a cavalier response, the Minister fails to mention how much the AWPR project will actually cost, where exactly any ‘money’ will come from, what terms will be attached to that ‘money’, what period the ‘money’ will be spent, borrowed or recouped over, and what the impact on local taxpayers and Government coffers will be. Does the Minister know how the AWPR will be funded and just isn’t letting on, or does he recognise the project is now unaffordable and is just avoiding answering the cost question properly?”

Rate of Return and Benefit / Cost Ratio – “unreliable”

In response to a question from Alison McInnes MSP, the Minister stated that the AWPR project: “has one of the highest rates of return among transport projects—that sits at 5, whereas the figures for other projects are dramatically lower”. Commenting on this, John McIntosh from Road Sense said:

“The Minister continues to promote the AWPR project using outdated costs and misleading rates of return. The projected cost of £295-£395 million, which was first presented in 2005, has undoubtedly risen in the meantime as the scope of the project has grown. This rise in cost will have a negative impact on the stated rate of return and benefit / cost ratio used to justify the project, and may now mean that the AWPR project as proposed is not justifiable. The figure of five that the Minister quoted has always been bettered by other options, and is now both unreliable and unattainable. Perhaps this is why the Minister has continually ignored our requests for an up-to-date, comprehensive costing for the project based on current proposals, construction costs and timescales.”

Is the Minister plucking figures out of the air to suit his own argument?

During general question time last week, the Minister also stated: “I am sure that we will make a decision that reflects the view of the 90-plus per cent of people in the north-east who want the road to be delivered as early as possible”. Commenting on this, Katherine Keay from Road Sense said:

“Can the Minister substantiate this claim that 90% of people in the north east want this over-priced, badly-thought-out road? Where exactly did he get this figure of 90%? We know that over 10,000 people took the time and effort to formally object to the AWPR project, which suggests that a large proportion of the people of the north east do not want the road to be delivered as currently proposed.”

Katherine Keay continued: “I suspect what the majority want is to see effective measures introduced to tackle traffic congestion in and around Aberdeen – not a giant, expensive road that won’t have any impact on traffic congestion in the city. That is not the same thing as supporting the AWPR. I further suspect that the Minister may be plucking figures from the air to suit his own argument. This is very poor practice. Let’s hope he has substantiated facts and figures to hand for the forthcoming PLI. We certainly do!”

ENDS

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Editors Notes:

1. Road Sense

Road Sense was formed in January 2006 and is a group that includes residents from across the Aberdeen area who are objecting to the proposed AWPR. See: www.road-sense.org

2. Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (AWPR)

More information on the AWPR can be found at: www.awpr.org

3. Transcript from General Question Time on Thursday 13 March 2008.

The transcript is shown below (taken from the Scottish Parliament's own official report), or can be found at: www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/officialReports/meetingsParliament/or-08/sor0313-02.htm#Col6942

Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what timescale is in place for the public local inquiry into the Aberdeen western peripheral route. (S3O-2646)

The Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change (Stewart Stevenson): We are making arrangements for the public local inquiry. I hope to announce shortly a date for the pre-inquiry meeting, which will set the inquiry's timescale.

Alison McInnes: Does the minister agree that time is of the essence? The AWPR is crucial to the north-east's economic wellbeing. Will he not only assure me that he will announce the inquiry in the immediate future, but guarantee that when the reporter makes her or his recommendation, the Government will reach a conclusion promptly?

Stewart Stevenson: I agree that the project is essential for the north-east. It has one of the highest rates of return among transport projects—that sits at 5, whereas the figures for other projects are dramatically lower. In line with our objective of supporting economic progress, we will seek to make the fastest possible decision that is consistent with fairness to all parties.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Does the minister agree that the AWPR's northern leg is less contentious than other parts? Could the public local inquiry, on which I hope he will announce details in the near future, be structured to proceed in segments that would allow faster progress to be made on delivering the AWPR?

Stewart Stevenson: We acknowledge that different parts of the route are subject to different challenges from objectors. People have been on the ground to undertake preliminary work on the northern leg of the route. I am confident that, overall, we will make the necessary progress and be able to proceed with the whole plan. We will see what the objectors have to say to the inquiry and what conclusions the reporter reaches. There will be several ways to deal with the outcome when we know it.

Lewis Macdonald (Aberdeen Central) (Lab): How does the minister intend to fund the western peripheral route when final decisions on it have been taken? Will those details be made public before the public local inquiry?

Stewart Stevenson: The route will be funded with money. The issues that the public local inquiry will cover relate to objectors' interests. Funding is unlikely to be relevant to the inquiry.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The First Minister has given a commitment to abide by the public local inquiry's recommendations, whatever they are. Will the minister confirm that that is still the Government's position?

Stewart Stevenson: It is unusual to reject the inquiry's findings, but the decision must be made by ministers, and of course ministers will make that decision. Parliament will be party to that. I am sure that we will make a decision that reflects the view of the 90-plus per cent of people in the north-east who want the road to be delivered as early as possible.

ENDS