**An update on Rail Freight Interchanges**

**25th January 2018**

For those wondering what has happened to the proposals to build two massive Rail Freight Interchanges on adjacent pieces of land here in South Northants, here is a brief summary of what we know. Ashfield Land’s Rail Central, which has been in planning for well over five years, and in our consciousness for over two, has still not been lodged as a formal application. There is a suggestion that another round of public exhibitions will be held in March so any formal submission to the Planning Inspectorate is likely to be in the second half of 2018 but, based on past experience with this Developer, who knows? In the meantime, fellow RFI Proposer, Roxhill, whose RFI has been in the official planning process a much shorter time (albeit it spent quite a while on the drawing board as a standard warehouse park without a rail connection,) has leapfrogged its rival, having completed a second round of public exhibitions in 2017. We expect the formal application to be lodged in the first half of this year before we stall ourselves to endure up to a year of examination and subsequent determination by the Planning Inspectorate. This process will undoubtedly overlap to a degree with an identical examination of the Ashfield Land proposal which will seriously stretch local (and national) resources and add elements of confusion and complication to the whole process.

The legislation that governs the development of Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges is the National Policy Statement for National Networks, originally brought in to govern the building of large pieces of infrastructure such as roads, railways and ports but later amended to incorporate rail freight interchanges in the hope that it would help facilitate the transferring of freight from road to rail by streamlining the planning process. The policy guidelines are very general and allow wily Developers the latitude to make their own wide interpretations of what constitutes an appropriate site for such a facility. However, there is enough content in the statement to dictate that such facilities are required in relatively small numbers and should be distributed “across the regions”. The appropriate spacing and location of these facilities is critical if the Government is to succeed in building an effective rail freight network; hence the term ‘Strategic’ that is applied to them.

There is a significant school of thought (in both the Logistics Industry and in Academia) that some Developers may well not have the development of an effective strategic rail freight network at the forefront of their thoughts and are using the National Policy Statement as a means of by-passing local planning laws and taking the determination of such applications to central Government where they have a greater chance of obtaining consent (having already been turned down by the Local Planning Authority). That two Developers are attempting to build two massive ‘Speculative’ Rail Freight Interchanges right next to each other and only 18 miles from the largest SRFI in the country is fairly conclusive evidence that they do not have the ‘national good’ as their primary objective. Whilst we remain confident that is highly unlikely any competent Government body would think that two next to each other would be a good idea, it is clear that there is no appetite to adopt a proactive approach to deal with this unprecedented situation. The Planning Inspectorate remain unmoved by the suggestion that an alternative approach is required to deal with this unique situation of two adjacent and competing proposals and appear determined to judge both individually on their own environmental merits, not on whether either or both would contribute to an effective national network. The consequence of this stance is that the tax payer will be paying for two long and detailed application processes when there is, in all likelihood, very little chance of both being consented.

It is also important to note that in the Midlands alone, two massive SRFIs have recently been consented (but not yet built) and five further proposals are at the pre-application stage. There are currently no other live applications in any other part of the country. The national network envisaged by the National Policy “across the regions” is currently all emerging in one region: this is not what the Policymakers envisioned. The original SRFI policy in 2004 even identified that existing SRFIs were predominantly in the Midlands and North and that there was a particular challenge in developing them in London and the South West; areas which today remain poorly served.

What makes this situation even more difficult to stomach is that Network Rail have declared that they do not believe all the commercial enterprises currently trying to connect to the West Coast Mainline can do so safely and Northampton County Council have serious doubts as to whether the national or local road network will be able to withstand the additional traffic pressures of one let alone two of these massive warehouse parks. Effective rail and road networks (with significant capacity for expansion) are a pre-requisite for the success of SRFIs but the absence of either, in this particular situation, does not seem to be a deterrent. Even one of the Developers has formally stated that the Environmental impact of two such developments would be unacceptable.

So what happens when the first application is judged and it is decided that “this town ain’t big enough for the both of them”. Will neither be consented? Will just one be consented and it so how will they decide which one? Will it be the first one even if this is not the best option? At some stage this issue will have to be confronted so would it not be best to do that now? The truth is nobody appears to know how this inconvenient situation will be handled and if they do they are not saying anything. At the moment, sticking of one’s head into the sand seems to be the order of the day. In the meantime neither Developer is showing any signs of going away so the community must prepare itself to fight for the survival of its uncongested rural environment. Local opinion and opposition remains strong and unwavering: given the current and future rail connected warehouse capacity in the region this is, strategically, the wrong place and the wrong time to build another SRFI.