

Blackwall Tunnel Press Briefing

Len Duvall, London Assembly Member for Greenwich and Lewisham, met this week (16.03.10) with senior Transport for London officers, including the Managing Director of Surface Transport, David Brown, to discuss tunnel-users' concerns about the planned night time and weekend closures at the Blackwall Tunnel between February this year and December 2012. Len Duvall made strong representations on behalf tunnel users who, he says "have been left angry and frustrated by the current works".

Len Duvall has also met with Clive Efford, MP for Eltham, and Nick Raynsford, MP for Greenwich and Woolwich, to discuss the problems currently faced by those using the Blackwall Tunnel.

Clive Efford MP said:

"One of Boris's first acts as Mayor was to scrap the Thames Gateway Bridge. He then turned his back on this part of London and left us with overcrowded roads and trains. My campaign to get him to give priority to the Silvertown Link proposals has clearly had an impact on his recent consultation over his transport plans. Southeast London has been the poor relation when it comes to transport investment and its time the Mayor tackled the problem of congestion at the Blackwall Tunnel.

"A road crossing will not be enough; we also need to expand the Docklands Light Rail services to North Greenwich from where we should look at extending it to Eltham. Boris claims that this idea has been looked at before, but I am not aware of anyone looking at a scheme to bring the DLR to Eltham from North Greenwich.

As new technology develops, emissions will diminish and the need to tackle congestion will become the priority. New road crossings alone will not solve this problem so we also need to expand the public transport options for people who want to travel between Greenwich and Docklands"

Nick Raynsford MP said:

"Large numbers of residents and businesses in Greenwich and Woolwich are very annoyed that there has been little, if any, consultation about the closures of the Blackwall Tunnel or the impact they will have on the already congested roads.

"Not only has Boris Johnson cancelled the Thames Gateway Bridge, which would have relieved pressure on the Blackwall Tunnel – he is also creating three years of chaos for Blackwall Tunnel users. His empty promise in the election campaign before he became Mayor to review the contra-flow in the Blackwall Tunnel has been exposed as a gimmick".

At the meeting, TfL officers informed Len Duvall that, although the southbound tunnel has now been fully upgraded, the northbound tunnel currently fails to meet EU safety guidelines developed in response to the 1999 Mont Blanc Tunnel fire, which killed 39 people. Speaking from City Hall, Len Duvall said: "the rationale behind the renovations is

compelling, not only are TfL legally compelled to comply with existing regulations but they also have a moral duty to make the tunnel as safe as possible for the motorists using it”.

Alternative Solutions

Temporary Vs Permanent Closure

Len Duvall did, however, ask TfL officers whether all alternative solutions to the current one had been explored. He was told that there were only two feasible options to enable the works to be conducted; the current one, which involves Sunday to Friday closures between 21:00 and 05:00, Sunday morning closures between 01:00 to 08:00 and occasional weekend closures; and another option of permanent closure of the northbound tunnel for approximately nine months. While both proposals have advantages and disadvantages for motorists, TfL eventually drew the conclusion that the current closures posed the least disruption.

Contra-flow

Following requests from local constituents, businesses, and MPs, Len Duvall also discussed the prospect of employing a northbound/southbound contra-flow system in the southbound tunnel, which will be open to northbound traffic only throughout the closures. However, he was told that the introduction of this system would take up to an hour each evening, which would mean that the southbound tunnel would have to remain open for an additional hour while this was carried out. According to the officers present, the result would have been an additional eight months of closures.

Len Duvall was told by TfL officers that, apart from the potential for cost and time overruns, the use of a contra-flow system during closures could not be employed as the safety of passengers under such a system could not be guaranteed. Len Duvall said: “TfL officers have assured me that the use of a contra-flow system at the Blackwall Tunnel presents too great a risk for tunnel users and increases the likelihood of ‘head on’ collisions, particularly between HGVs, which pose the greatest risk of fatalities should they catch fire in a tunnel. While a two-way system has been employed successfully at the Rotherhithe Tunnel, it is important to remember that HGVs are not permitted to use this tunnel.

In light of this information, Len Duvall said that he was “shocked” that Boris Johnson made a manifesto commitment, which he later scrapped, to reintroduce tidal-flow at the Blackwall Tunnel during his 2008 election campaign. Speaking at City Hall, Len Duvall said: “the Mayor was irresponsible and unwise to raise local expectations of a reintroduction of tidal-flow at the tunnel given the significant safety implications of doing so”.

Later Closures

In addition to contra-flow, Len Duvall also discussed the possibility of a later, 22:00, closure on weeknights but was informed that, as with the contra-flow proposal “the ability to close the northbound tunnel one hour later on weekdays at 22:00, would have resulted in six hours lost working time per week, adding anything up to another eight months to this already lengthy project”.

Woolwich Ferry

Despite his concerns about the closures, Len Duvall was pleased to hear that TfL is in ongoing negotiations with the operators of Woolwich Ferry to extend the existing service, which currently closes at 20:00, to 22:00. Len Duvall said that “although this process should have been anticipated and carried out in advance of the closures, I am relieved to see that TfL have recognised tunnel-users’ concerns and are now beginning to pursue methods of adding much-needed spare capacity during this difficult time”.

TfL Engagement

Although Len Duvall accepted the need for works to be carried out at the tunnel, he was critical of TfL’s communications strategy, which he believes “has inflamed motorists and residents”. With this in mind, he informed TfL of the measures he feels are necessary for TfL to “demonstrate that extensive efforts have been made to minimise inconvenience to motorists”.

Speaking at City Hall, Len Duvall said “TfL failed to provide residents, motorists and the business community with the level of consultation necessary to ensure that they were fully aware of the options available. While the opportunity to consult on the closures has now passed, TfL must keep tunnel-users informed about weekend closures or unscheduled changes to the works by using new media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and the local press”.

While acknowledging that TfL had endeavoured to minimise inconvenience to motorists using the Blackwall Tunnel, he sought particular assurances from TfL officers at the meeting that they would “walk the extra mile” in providing as much advance warning as possible of weekend closures in order to avoid gridlock. He was told by officers that they would seek to provide a minimum of four weeks notice to tunnel-users and that closures would be sensitively timed so as not to coincide with Tube and DLR maintenance closures wherever possible.

River Crossing Capacity

Speaking at City Hall about London’s severe shortage of capacity in terms of river crossings, Len Duvall said: “while the ongoing works at the Blackwall Tunnel are an inconvenience to many motorists, they merely serve to highlight the need for new river crossings east of Tower Bridge. Plans to create a crossing in the form of the Thames Gateway Bridge were well underway until Boris Johnson decided to scrap it as part of a series of cuts that have disproportionately impacted on southeast London.

“The Mayor has so far failed to show any signs that understands the plight of southeast London’s residents and businesses, which is demonstrated by the fact that, despite having been elected almost two years ago, he has still not received TfL’s full report on the feasibility of a variety of river crossings.

“What the people of London need, is a Mayor who is going to demonstrate a long-term vision for the city’s transport infrastructure, not one who hasn’t even decided whether or not he’ll stand for a [second term](#).”

“Even if he commits to the ‘Silvertown Link’, it may still take up to 20 years to create a new crossing, and there is no evidence whatsoever that Boris Johnson has even begun to think about how such a project would be funded in what will inevitably be difficult times for public spending.”

“Over the short-term, Boris Johnson can alleviate the worst effects of London’s river crossings crisis by committing to the current Woolwich Ferry service - which only has short-term public investment - and ensuring that its 45 year-old fleet is replaced as a matter of urgency. The Mayor should also consider the provision of an additional ferry service at the Gallions Reach – Thames Gateway Bridge alignment.”

“It is essential that, instead of wasting time and money on fanciful projects, such as his proposal for a ‘Thames Estuary Airport’, which it will cost up to [£5million](#) just to conduct further study in to, the Mayor begins to act on a matter which has for too long held the people and businesses of southeast London back”.