

Rail : The final frontier

On 22 November 2011, the INTERREG IVB North West Europe RoCK (Regions of Connected Knowledge) programme organised a conference in Lille under the banner “RAIL: The final frontier”. Hosted by Nord-Pas de Calais Regional Council, the conference drew 110 prominent players in the rail industry as well as transport politicians from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK.

Through three sessions including debates and RoCK partner presentations, the conference aimed at building political support to simplify cross-border rail regulation. “Political energy is key for the RoCK programme to be a success”, event moderator Chris Irwin from the European Passengers Federation stressed. The following is a summary of the three sessions:

Session 1: One Vision? Where do we really want cross-border rail to go?

Daniel Percheron, President of the Nord-Pas de Calais region, opened the first session with a lively speech. He spoke of the benefit of trains as “a tool to bring people together”, and pointed out that Europe’s future lies in the rail sector. The floor was then handed to the round table experts: Maximilian Strotmann, European Commission, Cabinet of Vice-President Siim Kallas, Commissioner for Transport; Joost Helms, Alderman for Mobility, City of Eindhoven; Serge Drugmand, Adviser of Philippe Henry, Minister for Environment, Spatial Planning and Mobility for the Wallonia Region; and Alex King, Deputy leader, Kent County Council.

The speakers touched upon the financial constraints of adding new track. “The special thing about the RoCK project is that you propose using existing infrastructure,” said Strotmann. Helms pointed out that with other modes of transport like the car and plane, no one is concerned with national borders: “Only with rail travel does it become an issue.” The solution is in better cooperation among national rail companies. And the solution also might mean that incumbent operators have to give up advantages they have enjoyed for a long time, said Strotmann. Rapporteur Professor Roger Vickermann from the University of Kent ended the session by calling on operators to make better use

of existing infrastructure thus bringing down prices. In regard to the costs, he urged industry players and politicians alike to look critically at who pays and who ultimately benefits. In the end there exist only two revenue streams for rail, the user or public funding.

Session 2: Getting across the border: Developing cross-border rail connections

The second session started with a presentation on RoCK cross-border studies. Ron Nohlmans from the City of Eindhoven spoke about the IC connection Eindhoven–Düsseldorf and efforts to develop and implement a cost-efficient solution between the two cities. He touched on the many challenges involved in this project, such as differences in Dutch and German voltage systems and unsynchronised timetables. Further cross-border friction points were addressed in the presentation on the Transmanche Metro by Adrien Peyronnel, INGÉROP, and Françoise Schneider-Français, Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière. The two speakers pointed out that technical solutions exist but legal issues might be more challenging.

Michael Robson, Independent Rail Consultant joined Roger Vickerman and Maximilian Strotmann for the ensuing panel and floor debate. The consensus was that there is a solution for the political and technical issues standing in the way – “If there is a will on all sides”, added Robson. Alex King concluded the session by pointing out that paths of economic strength can be created when high-speed and classical lines are joined intelligently. Chris Irwin added his thoughts, stressing that providing seamless travel requires imagination.

Session 3: Getting people out of their cars

Andreas Warnecke from Aachener Verkehrsverbund kicked off the final session with a presentation on efforts in the Meuse-Rhine area to improve ticketing systems to make cross-border rail travel more comfortable for the end user. Ruth Leuillette, City of Reading presented the Borough’s efforts to instigate modal shift and change travel behaviour. “It’s about getting people to choose more sustainable modes of transport using a wide variety of channels and measures”, she said. Stefan Jugelt, Project Officer for Telematic Applications at the European Railway Agency, and Mark Smith, Founder of Seat61.com, headed the panel and floor debate that followed. Jugelt called on the rail industry to



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voluntarily collect schedule data in a common format, as is practice in the airline industry. Smith took the thought further, pointing out that “the individual rail companies underestimate the value of a joined-up system”. Rapporteur Vickerman summed up the third session by drawing attention to the necessity to make it simple to use public transport. “There are many people who don’t make the effort and just fly,” said Vickerman.

Ruut Louwers, Programme Director at Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, Roger Vickerman and Chris Irwin ended the event with their closing remarks. Louwers views RoCK as seed money to get things started. “It is possible to make things happen – now the job is to convince politicians,” he commented. Vickerman pointed out, among others, the necessity to better manage capacity on existing infrastructure and to get the pricing right. Finally, Irwin asked, “What’s in it for the customer?” The RoCK project, he is certain, enables this question to be answered.