

## **Clifton Suspension Bridge Toll Increase - Objection - Update 3 October 2006**

### **Background**

1. The National Alliance Against Tolls (NAAT) was formed by groups protesting against existing tolls in England, Scotland and Wales. We are also opposed to toll increases and tolls by other names such as "congestion charges" and "road pricing".
2. The Trust that runs the Clifton Suspension bridge gave notice in October 2005 of an increase to the existing toll for motor vehicles from 30 pence to 50 pence. The NAAT objected.
3. The information that the Trust use to justify the toll increase has been difficult to obtain. We drew this and the absence of anything about the tolls increase on the Trust's website to the attention of the Department for Transport on the 8th September. The Trust's "Statement of Reasons" then (13th September) appeared on the website. The website said that anyone wanting a copy of the "Economic Case" for the Increase had to apply in writing and pay £5.

### **Reasons for Increase**

4. The notice of the toll increase gave no reason for it. But the Trust had said earlier that:-

*"The toll increase has been prompted by a huge rise in overheads resulting from:*

***The vaults:** ... Now additional funds are needed to monitor and maintain this hitherto unknown aspect of the historic structure.*

***Insurance:** A huge increase in the cost of insuring the bridge means that the premium doubled last year and further increases are predicted.*

***The illuminations:** .... A six-figure sum must be found if the new lights are to be in place for Bristol's celebration in 2006 of the bi-centenary of Brunel's birth...."*

5. The Trust's "Statement of Reasons" which was released in September of this year, gives similar reasons to the above with the addition that it is expected that there will be deficits if there is no toll increase though it gives no details.
6. The "Economic Case" of the Trust is dated October 2005 though it was only made available by the Trust this September. The Economic Case does give details of deficits at Appendix 4. It says that without toll increases there is an annual surplus of £45,000 in 2003, turning to a deficit of £374,000 in 2004. The deficits in the next 4 years are- £736,000, £272,000, £338,000, and £368,000. The surplus at the end of 2004 is shown as £5,739,000.

### **NAAT Response**

7. Paragraph 4 of the Economic Case shows for 2004 not a deficit of £374,000, but a surplus of £111,000. The latter figure agrees with the published Trust accounts. There is no explanation for the improvement, and the figures for subsequent years are unchanged. It appears that the

estimated deficits may not be reliable. The published Trust accounts for 2004 also show that there was a balance of £6,577,000 instead of the figure of £5,739,000 given in Appendix 4. We cannot find the correct figure in the Economic Case.

8. The Trust is not very open with its accounts. There is nothing on the Trust's web site, we received no reply to a request that we made in November 2005 for a copy of the latest accounts, and the 2004 accounts were not submitted to the Charity Commission till March 2006. The accounts for 2005 have not yet been submitted to the Charity Commission.
9. The Trust is managed by 12 Trustees, 10 of them are "residents" and the other 2 represent Bristol City Council and North Somerset Council. We asked the Department for Transport about the "residents", and were told that it means living or carrying on a business within 20 miles of the bridge, and that the remaining trustees decide who is appointed to a vacancy. It appears that the Trust is not a democratic organisation.
10. The Trust have submitted letters in support of their application from Bristol City Council and North Somerset Council. As the Trust operates activities that would normally be public expenditure, it would not be surprising if the local authorities did support the tolls. We could not, however, find anything in the minutes of the two councils and contacted them. Bristol told us that the matter had never been to the Council or any of its committees. We have asked the Council to confirm this and say whether it was officers who endorsed the toll increase, but despite various phone calls and emails we have not yet had an answer. The situation with North Somerset is that the only answer that we have had so far, to various emails and phone calls, is that they are looking at when and if the Council members endorsed the increase.
11. The Trust says that it receives no outside help, but it does not detail what efforts it may have made. The bridge as a road should be financed from the taxes collected from roads users. The Government collects about one billion pounds a week from roads users and only spends about one seventh of it on roads. We believe that there is no justification for tolls on what the Trust say is a "*key part of the Bristol transport network*".
12. Non road aspects of what the Trust say is an "*icon for the South West of England*", should be financed from general taxes via the local authorities or Government, or from private or quasi private sources that support heritage activities such as the National Lottery. Though there may be a Catch 22, in that some of these sources may not agree to grant funds as the Trust has a captive cash source in the form of motorists who have to pay tolls and a Government that is willing to grant permission for toll increases.
13. The Trust is not collecting the 5 pence toll from "*pedestrians, pedal cycles, carts, carriages and animals*". We do not believe that these users should be charged. But neither do we believe there is any justification in charging other roads users. It may be argued that it is not worth bothering to collect 5 pences, but if the toll for cars had not been increased at various times, then nobody would be bothering to collect those either.
14. A large part of the Trust expenditure appears to relate to activities which are not required for a highway. It seems that a large amount of money may be spent on the visitor centre, though there is little about this in the Economic Case. The Trust also gives one reason for the toll increase as the "*illuminations*". The Statement of Reasons says that the illuminations are "*important to maintain the Bridge's place as a south west symbol and an international tourist*

*attraction*". According to the Economic Case the cost of "Illuminations Replacement" was £900,000. It is not appropriate that this was financed from tolls, let alone that tolls are increased because of it.

15. The Trust say in the Economic Case that they are spending between 2004 and 2008 a total of £2,917,000 on "Maintenance projects". But the figures show that very little of this is spent on essential maintenance of the bridge- £900,000 is for the illuminations, £264,000 is for toll houses and equipment, £125,000 is for consulting engineers, £350,000 is "Contingency". That leaves £1.3 million, but a large part of that seems to be related to things like the vaults and "landscaping" which are a heritage activity, not the essential maintenance of a bridge.
16. The day to day cost of collecting the tolls is also an unnecessary cost for a normal highway. The Trust accounts do not give a breakdown, but the bulk of the one million pounds a year recurring costs are likely to be toll collection and administration. Costs that would not exist if the Trustees asked for the bridge to be taken over by the authorities.
17. The Trust cite a larger increase in insurance as one reason for the increase. The insurance seems to cost about £100,000 and they say it covers "*external risks*" only. It is not clear what this means, but it appears unlikely that there would ever be a claim, and in the case of a major disaster that closed the bridge, we would expect the Government to help. Or is the argument that the Government wouldn't help because unlike 99.99% of highways and bridges, this bridge is tolled? If so, then we have another Catch 22.
18. The last accounts (2004) submitted by the Trust to the Charity Commission indicate that they had reserves of £6,577,000 at December 2004. The previous year was £6,173,000, and the year before that was £5,539,000. As the turnover of the bridge is around £1 million a year, this is a very substantial reserve, and a reserve that has grown by £1 million in two years. There is no need for a reserve of this size but the Trust say that they actually want to increase it till it reaches 25% of the insured value of the bridge, which they give as £35 million or with an "extension clause" £50 million. If some major need arose for spending to maintain the bridge as a highway, there are other sources of funds that the Trust could apply to. In our view these large funds only serve to reduce the chances of external financial help, and act as an incentive to spend on non essential items.
19. It is suggested that a reserve might be used to pay for a replacement bridge. In the unlikely event of the existing bridge being closed, then there would have to be a decision taken by the authorities, firstly as to whether to replace the bridge and then how to finance it. In our view it would be nonsense to suggest that existing bridge users should have to pay now for some future bridge.
20. There may be a claim that as the bridge is historically important or an "icon" there is a justification for tolling it. The Tower bridge is an icon for London, but it is not tolled. Another equivalent to Brunel's bridge is possibly Telford's bridge over the Menai Strait. It is older than the Clifton bridge and at the time of its completion in 1826 the Menai bridge was the biggest suspension bridge. That bridge was also tolled, but the toll was removed at the end of 1940. We believe it is time that the toll was also removed from the Clifton bridge, and that there is certainly no justification for any increase in tolls.

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