

Hopes for rail service between Lydd Airport and Ashford International Station

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Left: Robin Gordon, director of LyddAir, advocating development of railway line at Lydd.

Hopes for a rail service between Lydd Airport and Ashford International Station could be revived now that the government has given approval to expand the airport.

A railway track, still in good condition and running straight past Lydd Airport, is ready and waiting to take passengers to Ashford.

Robin Gordon, above, who co-founded the original working group promoting this, said: “The fact that there is already a working line solves 95% of all problems in setting up a service.

“With all the confusion, regulation and government changes, now that permission is given the debate about rail access is back on the table.

“The line is still in excellent condition. This gives an opportunity to lobby for a new service.” The line, branching from the Ashford to Hastings route, originally took passengers from Appledore to Lydd Town, Brookland, Lydd Camp, Lydd-on-Sea, Greatstone, New Romney and Littlestone.

This entire branch was closed to passengers in 1967 after a mass cull of services recommended by British Railways chairman Dr Richard Beeching.

But the line is still used as a freight route to carry spent nuclear fuel from the Dungeness power station complex to Sellafield in Cumbria for reprocessing.

Despite closure for public transport the track was extended to Dungeness because of the generation of nuclear power there from 1965.

Mr Gordon, a director of the Lydd airline LyddAir, is also chairman of the Lydd Airport Rail Action Group.

This was set up in 2005 to develop rail services in Romney Marsh and East Sussex for general economic regeneration as well as for a developed airport.

The group held its inaugural meeting at the airport on September 15 that year. It discussed feasibility studies into upgrading existing rail networks in the region, signalling, rolling stock, level crossings, the location of a station to directly serve the airport and improving bus and coach services.

Executive manager Hani Mutlaq revealed that the airport was aiming to start extension work early next year once it had met certain conditions.

Responding to a question about the future of the neighbouring Lydd Golf Club, which is also owned by Lydd Holdings Ltd, Mr Mutlaq pointed out that the airport also had planning consent for a four-star hotel on the club site.

He said: “We are looking forward to developing the airport, the hotel and the golf course together. They complement each other perfectly.

“This will support the economic regeneration of Romney Marsh and create a range of excellent prospects for local people.”

Planning permission for a £7.5 million, 75-bedroom hotel alongside the golf clubhouse was given in 2005.

Until now airport bosses were not able to give even an approximate idea as to when the runway work would begin. They have several hurdles to clear in terms of planning conditions, such as protecting wildlife.

About 100 supporters representing local businesses, residents and others were invited to the celebration to mark the success in gaining planning permission for a runway extension and new terminal building.

It was there that Mr Mutlaq said that Kent businesses would be in the front of the queue when Lydd Airport started to award contracts for the £25 million development.

He added that it was “an aspiration” to create a rail link from Ashford International Station once future passenger numbers had expanded to make such an investment viable.

This would put air passengers en route to the high speed rail link for 38-minute journeys to London.

Plans to expand the runway by nearly 300 metres were first submitted in 1988 and years later a working group was set up to look into a rail link between the airport and Ashford station.

This would be an old spur line from the present Ashford to Hastings line, going from Appledore to Lydd.

Source: <http://www.kentonline.co.uk/ashford/news/plan-to-revive-rail-link-639/>

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