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Waldenburgerbahn: Re-gauging now decided

Der Beobachter

On Thursday 17th December 2015, the Cantonal Parliament of Basel-Land voted by 57 to 20 votes to convert the 750mm gauge Waldenburgerbahn to metre-gauge. The ordering of new rolling stock will now be initiated, and the track and structures will be altered so that metre-gauge operation can be inaugurated in 2023. It was expressly stated in the debate that the overall cost of CHF275m for track, rolling stock, new workshops and extensive work on structures and profile is not the only consideration.

The critical issue is seen as sustainability, as there is no assurance that 750mm gauge rolling stock could be obtained in the future (see Stadler's comments below). Equally, bus substitution is seen as not feasible, in view of road conditions, numbers of passengers; on going operating costs; comfort and reliability. Despite a dense anti-railway smokescreen from a few extreme-right members, this option was voted down by a large majority. With this decision the process should be complete. Funding, a large proportion of which is assured from the Confederation's Infrastructure Fund resources, is now also legally secured.

SRS members wishing to record the current operations should certainly plan a visit to Waldenburg at the earliest opportunity as some preparatory works may soon start. The present rolling stock will now be kept running until replaced by new metre-gauge material. Steam locomotive G3/3 No.5 'G. Thommen', now privately owned, is in the depot at Waldenburg and was not included in the merger of the WB and Basel-Land Transport (BLT), which has already been legally approved. The loss of steam specials were an emotional part of the discussion, but in fact No.5 has not run for a year; and its three passenger cars need urgent and serious overhaul to meet current operational and safety standards. Hence, most thoughtful Cantonal parliamentarians saw the snag of letting a 110 year old locomotive and its voluntary, though resourceful, team dominate the future needs of some 2 million passengers per year. The change will not be easy. Effectively the line was built as almost a roadside tramway and has some street running, with space and clearance conditions in the valley and through the communities being very restrictive. Also, as reported earlier in *Swiss Express*, SBB plans a long overdue total rebuilding of Liestal station, the WB's northern mainline connection, commencing in 2026. This, on present intentions, will require the WB's approach tracks to be closed for up to a year, with connections probably maintained by a bus shuttle from the halt at Altmarkt some 1.4km distant. There may yet be scope for change in these long-term plans.



The WB at Holzstein. Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

So will close a chapter, open since the WB was inaugurated on 1st November 1880 as Switzerland's only 750mm gauge light railway. After this National legislation, that then decreed either standard (1435 mm) or metre-gauge for future construction, was passed in time to direct the subsequent boom of metre-gauge lines whose often flourishing survivors are known to us today. Divergent gauges were expressly allowed for mountain rack railways (often SLM's favourite 800mm) and Funiculars. WB Loco No.5 dates

from its second series of steam engines, of which No.4 was also saved and now stands in the Luzern Transport Museum (the VHS). The line was electrified at 1,500V dc in 1953, and the current stock is the second series built for the line between 1985 and 1993 and is now in need of replacement.

Explaining the rolling stock question

As a part of the re-gauging debate Stadler (probably the only rolling stock builder with the necessary expertise to meet an order from the WB), offered some explanations that are reproduced and expanded upon here. Although to build new units for 750mm operation is at present possible it would be disproportionately costly. This is because the number of units required would be small (there would be no conventional production line as such) and also contemporary rules and specifications increase the complexity of the equipment required on each unit, whereas space would be limited. Constructing stock for a WB rebuilt at metre-gauge would be easier, but due to the alignment of the line and the tight clearances in many of the communities it passes through on the route, will still be restricted. Therefore the planned overall width of the new stock at 2.40m is a compromise that unfortunately will add another cost factor. The usual metre-gauge standard width is 2.65m, whilst street-running BVB and BLT trams are 2.30 m wide. For various reasons the Canton has ruled-out using trams on the rebuilt line. However, Stadler is currently building twenty-four 2.40m-wide metre-gauge cars for the Appenzellerbahn (this also has restricted clearances in some locations) and these would give a design basis for the further construction the WB requires. Apart from having the ability to build units efficiently on a conventional production line, the use of many standard components will help to keep costs in-line. Also the move to wider stock will allow major increases in seating capacity, probably in the region of 30% in a standard car, as well as more standing room. Finally, although it can only be an opinion, Stadler find it doubtful that manufacturers could be found to build for 750mm gauge in a future round of renewals. ❑