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Swiss Long-term Passenger Service Planning

Der Beobachter gives an insight into the train service planning process

Busy day at Biel. *Photo:* Mike Maskall

A lthough the overall timetable is a national obligation vested in the Federal Government, the operating railways SBB/CFF/FFS, BLS, SOB, RhB, etc., have their detailed homework to do in timetable compilation in order to optimise services, their use of resources, and to meet the obligations of their respective concessions. When compiling the overall timetable three main inputs have to be taken into consideration. These are: the available track layout, a given but influenced by on-going investment and improvement projects; the overall defined service standard, determined for the National Parliament by the Federal Transport Office (BAV), for example to sustain the National Takt, the regular interval interlinked timetable, and the input of Cantonal agreements to provide, under contract, regional services of defined content. Parliament may object and issues may give rise to a referendum, but long-term planning and financial stability is given when the legal mandate for the overall plan has been given.

It is then still a complex process, involving InterCity services, which should be profitable, down to heavily subsidised local lines and postal coaches, paid for by Cantonal authorities and communes. Naturally any setting of priorities, as for track access, already gives enough to argue about. The mandatory consultation process for the next timetable involves all concerned operator, political and user bodies. The network must also cater for freight traffic, some of which (Alpine transit, for example), is also subsidised. Freight customers and competing open access operators are not usually satisfied to play second fiddle to passenger trains. The process takes two years, so we have a new timetable yearly with minor readjustments and bi-annually which may, but doesn't have to, have bigger changes. Implementation of new works is usually timed to fit in the annual timetable. The level of detailed planning will surprise some. Network capacity allocation by operators and the Federal Transport Office includes use of station platforms by individual service trains for example, so that by the next timetable change you know which platform your specific train will use.

Improvements to an admittedly inadequate, and in recent years under-maintained, infrastructure are a public issue, even on the many so-called private lines whose investments are usually publicly financed. Parliament votes this money in periodic programmes, so the projects supported have to be planned well ahead. That means a stable political basis, and an agreed setting of priorities. There is never enough money, so horse-trading is rife. Rail operators see the problems and opportunities. Cantonal governments see their voters and their own values. A good example is in this edition's *Swiss News*, where we have noted that at Luzern, a Category B centre, the go-ahead has been given for planning to commence on a new through station for completion in the 2030 programme.

But what are Category A, B and C centres? The determination of what services are appropriate is a Federal issue. What constitutes an Inter-City route, target travel times and calling points, are defined by a 3-part scale which is often controversial. Category A centres, with highest priority, are Basel, Bern, Zürich, Génève and Lausanne. Category B centres include Biel, Lugano, Luzern, St Gallen, Winterthur, Chur, Fribourg, La Chaux de Fonds, Neuchâtel, Schaffhausen, Sion, Thun and Zug, conurbations of more than a 70,000 population, and the airports at Zürich and Génève. Category C includes the tourist centres, such as Interlaken, and smaller regional centres such as Liestal or Rheinfelden. This is a red rag to some local bulls, which feel that their community deserves better, especially if they can plead a historic pattern of express train stops. Special cases naturally occur all over; the connections in Visp to Zermatt; or Neuchâtel to the Jura; or Chur and Landquart to the RhB, are obvious. However, the world inevitably moves on, so we can only remember that Kandersteg once-upon-a-time had calls all day from international and sleeping car expresses, prior to the Lötschberg Base Tunnel reducing its historic status. Likewise Basel's generous Gotthard/Ticino service was a legacy of the heavy German-Italian traffic of years back that has long gone. The need to have a scale of reference for tomorrow's services and investments is clear, and in any case is applied flexibly, with social and net benefits always politically prominent. Sometimes who pays the piper can help determine the tune. The objective in long-term planning is to avoid nonsenses and waste, and to move forward on a broad front both nationally and regionally, respecting what is necessary as well as desirable. The whole is never perfect, is always in discussion, but is a good example of how 'Switzerland Incorporated' actually works. 🇨🇭