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VICTORIA.

REPORT

FROM

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE
ON RAILWAYS

ON THE PROPOSED

BAIRNSDALE TO ORBOST RAILWAY
EXTENSION;

TOGETHER WITH

BOOK OF REFERENCE AND MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

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RAILWAYS STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT No. 6.—[6d.]—14401.

R E P O R T.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS, to which the Legislative Assembly referred the question of constructing an extension of the Bairnsdale to Orbost railway across the Snowy River into Orbost Township, has the honour to report as follows:—

ORIGINAL PROPOSAL.

1. In 1909 the Committee had before it for consideration the general question of railway connexion with East Gippsland. One of the proposals submitted was to construct a broad-gauge railway from Bairnsdale to Orbost, 61 miles in length, at an estimated cost of £425,210. This included bridging the Snowy River and terminating the railway on the east side of the stream in that township. It was ascertained that if the railway ended on the flat land on the west side of the Snowy River close to the west end of the road bridge spanning that stream a saving of about £26,000 in the cost of the line could be made. As the estimated loss during the first year of operation for a railway from Bairnsdale into Orbost Township was about £4,500, and as Mr. M. E. Kernot, Chief Engineer for Railway Construction, informed the Committee that a station could be located on the west side of the Snowy River about three-quarters of a mile from the Orbost post-office, and that this station could be made secure from inundation by all but the high floods, which occur on the Snowy River about once in twenty-five years, the Committee recommended that the terminal station be placed on the west side of the Snowy River. By this means the capital outlay was lessened by about £26,000, and the annual loss by close on £1,000, mainly owing to the reduction in the interest charges. A further reduction of £12,500 was made in the capital expenditure by using serviceable second-hand rails, bringing the estimated loss during the first year of operation down to a little over £3,000.

INCREASED COST OF RAILWAY.

2. This estimate of the cost of construction made early in 1909 was based on an average wage rate of 7s. per day for labourers. The Act authorizing the construction of the railway which was passed towards the close of that year directed that a wage averaging 7s. 6d. should be paid to the navvies. Subsequently, however, the rate was, by direction of Parliament, increased to 8s. 6d., and later on to 9s. per day. Mr. Kernot recently informed the Committee that, mainly in consequence of these increases, the cost of completing the railway to the west bank of the Snowy River, with a temporary station only on that site, will exceed the estimated cost, £386,710, by £25,000, and that if a permanent station in place of a temporary one is built on the low land on the west side of the Snowy River the cost of the line will be about £30,000 more than the sum stated in 1909. He further said that the railway from Bairnsdale to the temporary station on the west bank of the Snowy River, across the stream from Orbost Township, will be opened for traffic about the end of 1915. From where the line entered the Snowy valley to the terminus of the railway on the west side of the river there were 49 chains of line on piling to permit of the free flow of the flood waters and 40 chains of earthen embankment, including 27 chains of station grounds.

3. When questioned by the Committee Mr. Kernot stated he had not, from an expert's point of view, condemned the station site on the west side of the Snowy River. He had advised the Committee in 1909 that a station could be constructed there, and he had not changed his opinion in any respect. At that time he pointed out that a permanent station could be made on the west side of the river and raised

to a sufficient height to be above flood level. Recently, however, he stated that the approaches to the station would in times of flood be under water. This drawback could be remedied by raising the approaches. But this would cause the expenditure of a fair sum of money which he had not estimated, because such work if undertaken would have to be done by the local municipality in conjunction with the Country Roads Board, and not by the Railway Department.

OBJECTIONS TO STATION ON WEST SIDE OF SNOWY RIVER.

4. Mr. Kernot, while stating that a permanent railway station could be constructed on the site indicated by him in 1909 on the west bank of the Snowy River raised above high flood level "and protected against flood damage to a reasonable extent, so that little or none should occur oftener than once in twenty-five years, and serious damage would not be likely once in fifty years," now favoured advantage being taken of the offer of the Orbost Shire Council and the Country Roads Board to jointly contribute £7,000 towards the cost of a combined road and railway bridge which would be erected some 3 chains up-stream from the existing wooden road bridge, which was becoming unsafe for heavy vehicular traffic, and would soon have to be replaced by a new structure. A new road bridge would cost £7,000. A bridge to carry the railway only would cost £15,000. The cost of a combined road and railway bridge would be £18,500. If this were agreed to the railway could be carried into Orbost Township. He said one objection which could be urged against placing the station on the west side of the river was that the surrounding flat land was unsuitable, because of the risk of the ground being flooded every few years, for the growth of a township, which would probably spring up around that terminus. Moreover, the land there, which would be occupied by stores and houses, is specially suited for the cultivation of maize and root crops, being fertile alluvial soil, whereas the higher land on the east side of the river where Orbost Township is situated is not adapted for the production of such crops, but is admirably located for township purposes, being well drained. A further objection to placing the railway terminus on the west side of the Snowy River was that when the time came, perhaps some years hence, to extend the railway further into East Gippsland towards the New South Wales border the station would then be moved into Orbost Township, and this action would cause a strong protest from those who had built dwellings or places of business adjacent to the station on the west side of that stream because of the vested interests they had acquired at that site.

COST OF PROPOSED EXTENSION.

5. The cost of extending the railway 60 chains across the Snowy River into Orbost Township is estimated at £36,474, including £18,500 for the dual purpose bridge, and £2,800 for bridging the back water on the east side of the Snowy River at the foot of Orbost Township. This estimate also includes certain terminal equipment which will be provided at the temporary station, and which could later on be removed to the permanent station in Orbost Township. The cost of such equipment and also of station buildings, &c., which could be postponed at the site on the west side of the river if it were now determined to make that terminus a temporary one only and extend the railway into Orbost Township, was included in the original estimate of £386,710 made in 1909. In order, however, to comply with the requirements of the Railways Standing Committee Act the cost of such works (£9,274) has been also embodied in the estimate of £36,474 for the extension. If such equipment were later on removed to the new site the cost of removal, namely, £650, would have to be deducted from the £9,274, leaving a net sum of £8,624, representing the value of the station buildings, &c., postponed at the temporary site and of the transferred equipment, to be taken from the estimated cost of £36,474. This would reduce the cost to £27,850, from which had to be deducted £7,000—being the joint contribution of the Country Roads Board and the Orbost Shire Council to the combined road and railway bridge—leaving the net cost of extending the railway across the river into Orbost Township at £20,850. These figures are exclusive of the cost of land required for the railway extension. They are based on an average wage rate of 9s. per day for labourers, and include the cost of new 60-lb. steel rails at £1,050 per mile. The total quantity of earthworks to be shifted on the extension is about 34,000 cubic yards.

6. Mr. Kernot put the matter in another way. He said the present estimate of the cost of the railway from Bairnsdale to the west side of the Snowy River if a permanent station is made there is £416,710. If a temporary station to suffice for not more than two years is substituted for that permanent station the cost will be reduced to £411,164, or £5,546 less. If a temporary station is placed on the west side of the river for not more than two years, and the railway is extended across that stream during that period with a permanent station in Orbost Township the cost will, after allowing for the joint contribution of £7,000 from the Orbost Shire Council and the Country Roads Board, be £432,014, or £20,850 more than the £411,164. If a permanent station be made on the west side and, say, ten years hence the railway is extended across the Snowy River with a permanent station in Orbost Township, the present estimated cost would be £450,000, as there would in that case be no contribution of £7,000 to be set off against the outlay, and by that time a number of the postponed works at the west site would have been undertaken and could not be removed to advantage.

7. The combined road and railway bridge would be 525 feet long, consisting of five openings, each of 85 feet, and five openings, each of 20 feet. The larger openings would have concrete piers, on which would rest a steel superstructure, while the smaller openings would have timber pile piers with rolled-steel joist superstructure. Provision was made in the design of this bridge for a foot-bridge at one side for pedestrian traffic. It was proposed to make the bridge a fixed structure, as there is no navigation on the Snowy River above Orbost Township. The width of the roadway of the bridge would be 18½ feet between the railings. The footway would be independent of this at a lower level. The extra cost of making the railway bridge a dual purpose structure is estimated at £3,500, including provision for pedestrian traffic. If a separate road bridge were built it would be in reinforced concrete. The width of that bridge would be also 18½ feet—the same as the dual purpose bridge. The height of the floor of the proposed railway bridge above the bed of the Snowy River would be 41 feet, and there would be approximately 14 feet clear between the river banks and the decking of that structure. Both Mr. Kernot and Mr. W. Calder, Chairman of the Country Roads Board, who was also examined by the Committee, expressed the opinion that the proposed dual purpose bridge would have sufficient waterway to permit of the passage of the floods, and that the erection of this structure would not cause any serious inundation of the adjacent agricultural lands.

LARGER ESTIMATED LOSS.

8. The loss on the Bairnsdale—Orbost railway will be larger than was estimated in 1909. At that time it was expected there would be a deficiency of a little over £3,000 in the first year of operation. Owing, however, to the capital outlay on the line exceeding the estimate by about £25,000, due mainly to the increase in wages paid to labourers and others, the interest charge will be £1,000 a year more than was then anticipated, bringing the loss up to about £4,000. To this has to be added, according to the figures recently furnished by the Railways Commissioners, a further sum of £1,725, representing the loss of revenue consequent on the abolition last year of railway "local" rates, which were to have been charged on this line when it was opened for traffic. This loss is after allowing a sum for increased traffic resultant from the abolition of local rates. In this way the estimated loss on the railway from Bairnsdale to the terminus fixed in 1909 on the site on the west side of the Snowy River is increased from slightly over £3,000 to £5,725 in the first year of operation, after allowing for the reduction in the capital expenditure caused by using serviceable second-hand rails instead of new ones. If the railway be extended across the river into Orbost Township a further loss of £711 is estimated, after providing for interest at 4 per cent. on the £20,850 additional capital outlay, and allowing £100 for increased working and maintenance expenses on the extension, and £223 for revenue expected to be earned by carrying passengers, mails, goods, and live stock over the additional 60 chains to and from Orbost Township.

9. As it was stated that the traffic which had so far passed over the opened portion of the Bairnsdale to Orbost railway had been larger than was estimated in 1909, the Committee recently asked the Railways Commissioners if this were so. They replied that an examination of the available returns of traffic for the twelve months

ended 30th June, 1915, showed "it is too early to say with any degree of reliability whether the estimate of traffic made in 1909 is likely to be affected to any material extent."

DIFFERENCE IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF 1909 AND 1915.

10. The question of railway extension from Bairnsdale to Orbost stands in a different position to-day to what it did in 1909. When the Committee recommended the construction of that line it did so in the belief that railway local rates would continue in operation, and that the loss during the first year following the opening of the line would be but little more than £3,000. The abolition of these rates will, however, have the effect of largely increasing that loss. Had it been known in 1909 that such a course would have been followed or that the railway deficiency rate would not be enforced, the recommendation of the Committee may have been withheld. To still further increase that loss by £711 in extending the railway across the Snowy River into Orbost Township, bringing the expected deficiency up to £6,436, would add to the difficulties of the Railways Commissioners in making the railways of the State pay their way.

11. On the other hand, the Committee did not overlook that if it were now determined to extend the railway into Orbost Township it would save a capital expenditure of £1,800 in raising the level of the station grounds on the west side of the Snowy River so as to make them safe from inundation during a high flood, and also other outlay which could be postponed if that site is to be merely a temporary one. Moreover, should the station on the west side of the river be made a permanent one, it may become isolated from Orbost Township, and in consequence be rendered useless to the townspeople for several days by reason of the flood waters submerging the approaches to that railway terminus unless the Orbost Shire Council raises the level of the main road leading to that station. Neither did the Committee disregard the offer of the Country Roads Board and the Orbost Shire Council to jointly contribute £7,000 to the cost of a combined railway and road bridge, as the existing road bridge is in such a condition that a new structure must soon take its place and the offer may not be available for long.

12. A statement was made by witnesses at Orbost that if two bridges—separate road and railway structures—were built across the Snowy River in such close proximity to each other there would be a danger of *débris* brought down in flood-time becoming blocked between the two bridges, and thus obstructing the passage of the rushing waters, causing them to further inundate and perhaps damage the valuable flats adjacent to that township. When asked if he concurred in that view, Mr. W. Calder, Chairman of the Country Roads Board, replied:—"Only to a limited extent. Naturally, any obstruction in a river tends to obstruct the flow of that river, but the new bridge would have fewer piers and cause less obstruction than the old (existing road) bridge with its mass of piles and walings. It is proposed to build reinforced concrete piers with a cut-water edge up-stream, and that limits the obstruction to a very great extent." He pointed out that if two bridges were erected and the piers of both were in line there would be less obstruction than if they were out of alignment. He added that where the bridges would be there is a fairly straight reach in the river with rather a free get-away for the water. Nevertheless, there would be a slight tendency for *débris* to accumulate.

13. So far the settlement which has been induced in East Gippsland as the result of railway connexion with Orbost being undertaken and almost completed has not been large. The Committee in its Report of 1909 on the general question of railway extension into that country pointed out that for the reasons then stated increased settlement and production in East Gippsland would not be as rapid as that which usually follows the construction of railways in the Mallee and other parts of Victoria.

RECOMMENDATION OF COMMITTEE.

14. The proposed short extension of the railway across Snowy River into Orbost Township, while securing a more suitable site for a terminal station, would not cause any further development in East Gippsland. It would, however, add to the financial burden which the State has to bear in connexion with the railways constructed during recent years in country districts to induce settlement and production. As the expected

loss which will arise from the construction of the railway from Bairnsdale to the west side of the Snowy River in the first year of operation has, from various causes, advanced from £3,000, as estimated in 1909 when Parliament authorized this railway, to £5,725, as recently estimated by the Railways Commissioners, the Committee is of opinion it is inexpedient to further add to that loss by extending the railway into Orbost Township, in view of Mr. Kernot's statement that provision was made in his estimate of £386,710 in 1909 for the construction of a permanent station on the west side of the Snowy River which would be raised above flood level and be protected against flood damage to a reasonable extent, so that little or none should occur oftener than once in twenty-five years, and serious damage would not be likely once in fifty years.

DIVISION.

15. The following extract from the Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee shows the division which took place during the consideration of the question referred to it :—

THURSDAY, 14TH OCTOBER, 1915.

Mr. J. W. Billson moved, That, in the opinion of the Committee, it is expedient to extend the Bairnsdale-Orbost railway into Orbost Township 60 chains, at an estimated cost of £20,850.

After discussion—

Mr. Hicks moved, as an amendment, that all the words after "That" in the motion be omitted with the view to insert in place thereof the following words:—"as the expected loss which will arise from the construction of the railway from Bairnsdale to the west side of the Snowy River in the first year of operation has, from various causes, advanced from £3,000, as estimated in 1909 when Parliament authorized this railway, to £5,725, as recently estimated by the Railway Commissioners, the Committee is of opinion it is inexpedient to further add to that loss by extending the railway into Orbost Township, in view of Mr. Kernot's statement that a station unlikely to be injured by floods can be constructed on the west side of the river, and provision for such a station was made in the cost estimated in 1909."

Question—That the words proposed to be omitted stand part of the motion—put.

The Committee divided.

Ayes, 2.

Mr. J. W. Billson,
Mr. Toutcher.

Noes, 4.

The Chairman,
Mr. Hicks,
Mr. Melville,
Mr. Solly.

And so it passed in the negative.

Question—That the words proposed to be inserted in place of the words omitted be so inserted—put and resolved in the affirmative.

The motion, as amended by Mr. Hicks, was agreed to.

SAMUEL BARNES,
Chairman.

Railways Standing Committee Room,
State Parliament House,
Melbourne, 15th October, 1915.

[Minutes of Evidence are not printed.]