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BR plans to spend £1.4bn to ease  
commuter misery in South-east

Larry Elliott

BRITISH Rail will spend  
£1.4 billion over the  
next five years to expand capacity on over-  
crowded commuter lines in the  
South-east by 30 per cent.

But an even bigger invest-  
ment in the infrastructure,  
backed by government money,  
will be needed to cope with the  
massive expansion in demand  
expected between now and the  
end of the century, Network  
SouthEast's director, Mr Chris  
Green, said yesterday.

Speaking at a conference on  
congestion, Mr Green disclosed  
that Network SouthEast car-  
ried a record 468,000 commut-  
ers to London every day in 1988  
and warned that the City would  
"stagnate" unless solutions  
were found to the problem.

"The capital, its employers,  
its workers and their jobs will  
vote with their feet and find  
more acceptable pastures."

With the looming industrial  
action on BR and London  
Transport threatening to bring  
London to a halt, Mr Green said  
commuting by rail had grown  
by 25 per cent since 1983. -

Commuters are likely to take  
to the already choked roads if  
public transport does stop in  
the coming weeks, but they are  
certain to face massive delays.

Mr Green told the conference that a road-based answer to the

problem of overcrowding was neither affordable nor environmentally acceptable.

"Commuting into central London by road has actually fallen over the last three years, despite the huge increase in total demand. If all the additional commuters forecast in the next 10 years decided to arrive by car, London would need additional car parks four times the size of Hyde Park to accommodate them."

BR fares have risen steadily by more than the rate of inflation during the 1980s, But travellers have become increasingly irritated by crowded trains and difficulties in finding a seat.

Mr Green suggested that further "judicious" fare increases would be imposed to pay for some of the longer term solutions to the problem of overcrowding, such as the two new cross-London tunnels proposed by the Central London Rail Study. However, he would also be seeking Government grants and using profits from property development to finance the schemes.

The growth in business, together with rising fares, has been so dramatic during the 1980s that it is no longer inconceivable that Network South-East could break even over the next few years, paving the way for 2 possible privatisation

some time in the 1990s.

Homeward bound... BR's vinta to sdiroiare more trains and more seats should end the frustration of footsore commuters

Mr Green said the five-year,

£1.4 billion programme would be funded out of Network SouthEast's own resources and would include:

@ Orders next month for the new Networker train, which will start the reequipping of the Kent suburban services into Charing Cross and Cannon Street within 18 months. The trains will be quicker and provide 16 per cent more capacity;

@ Increasing capacity on existing services by improving availability of trains and providing more seats on them;

@ Developing cross-London services by enhancing the new Thameslink service, to which 16 per cent of new customers have transferred in its first full year of operation;

@ Increasing car parking capacity at suburban stations from the present 65,000 spaces

to 100,000 by 2001, double the capacity of the present central London car parks.

Looking further ahead, Mr Green said the £45 million Stansted Airport link would carry up to 30,000 passengers a day when it opened in 1991, the £200 million Heathrow Airport link would cater for 40,090 travellers and the Channel Tunnel rail tink would carry 16,000 passengers every hour by the late

1990s in half the present journey time.

Despite continuing protests against the Chunnei link, BR hopes to have a detailed route ready by the summer and introduce a private parliamentary bill by November.

It hopes to defuse some of the opposition to the new line by holding out the prospect of increased capacity and faster trains to Kent.