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PRESS STATEMENT

BASED ON A WSR STAFF NOTICE FROM THE PLC CHAIRMAN

Dear News Editor,

14 November 2018

As a copy of an earlier WSR staff notice last week about our ORR (Office of Rail & Road) inspection and the decision to close the railway for the first three months of 2019 then led to some speculative comment and adverse media coverage, please find below some key extracts from the latest WSR staff briefing note which answers a number of questions that have been raised and sets out where the WSR is going and setting out to achieve.

To All WSR staff. Volunteers and supporters,

Dear Colleague,

14 November 2018

In the light of our recent ORR (Office of Rail & Road) inspection visit, I am writing to you all again in order to explain a number of key changes that have been made, or will be made, following our most recent Board meetings and how these significant changes will affect our Railway to the overall good of the WSR over the coming months and years. This letter is going to all who are employed, volunteer or support the WSR plc in helping us to run the railway.

The plc Board unanimously agreed to elect myself as the West Somerset Railway plc's new Chairman, rather than just in my previous interim role, and I am working to now re-structure the Board and focussing on recruiting new professionally qualified directors with specific key portfolios to drive forward the 2019 business plan and also deal with the ORR's recommendations.

Whilst we have had a number of director resignations recently -- whom we all thank for their good service to the railway and who have left the Board for their own reasons -- I am very pleased to report that former, long-serving WSR plc managing director and HRA Vice Chairman Mark Smith has agreed to re-join the Board as our Policy & Business Development Director. Most of you will know that Mark was the longest-ever serving WSR MD and helped steer the railway with great success during the 1990's for over 15 years. Welcome back Mark!

Also, following some recent unhelpful speculation and media reports, I also want to reassure you about the facts so that we can all literally help get the WSR back on track. As ever, we need more investment and strong support right across the railway.

More Follows

For the avoidance of doubt, the **ORR has NOT issued** either an **Improvement or Prohibition Notice** on the WSR, as evidenced by the fact that we are running **ALL** of our scheduled seasonal services in December. **We are not closed!**

Many of our Santa, Dunster by Candlelight and Winter Steam Festival trains are filling up well; some are already sold out, with overall sales better than last year, but we still want visitors and local people to back the WSR and we need more ‘bums on seats’ to try to sell these trains out before our fallow period.

We also expect popular former GWR Manor Class loco No. 7828, originally named ‘Odney Manor’, to return to traffic in December, but probably in the guise of ‘Norton Manor 40 Commando’ when it was renamed in 2011 in recognition of, and dedicated to, HM Royal Marines 40 Commando whose base is at nearby Norton Manor camp.

I am working on the specific action plan direct with the ORR about their recommendations for change, but I wish to make it 100% clear that **there has never been any major safety threat or unreported dangerous occurrence**, and that **we have received no conditions from the ORR on this topic**.

This is actually all about the plc Board and new leadership recognising the changes in the modern railway industry, including heritage lines, with which we must comply.

Yes, I accept we were always going to take some knocks in the public domain about our perhaps brave decision to close the WSR for three months in 2019, but we can now focus on what is actually happening and why, and the positive measures we are taking. The WSR is only closed temporarily for three months, not permanently!

At our last plc Board meeting, and in the light of the ORR inspection, I proposed that the WSR should close for an extended period between January and April 2019 in order to allow us a period to re-group and seek to deal with as many of the ORR’s findings and recommendations to us for action as possible.

Our decision has been seen as a positive, responsible decision by the ORR. I believe it also demonstrates a proactive commitment towards safety by our adoption of a sensible and pragmatic approach to help us meet the 2018 requirements.

Whilst this may be seen as a very tough and unpopular decision by a number of people both within and outside the railway, it is one that was made with absolute responsibility, logic, reason and for the good of the railway.

So, the decision **was not foisted upon us by the ORR** on safety grounds as some have incorrectly assumed and suggested, but we made a considered, pragmatic decision to extend our normally closed two-month Winter period after Christmas and New Year to the end of April.

In reality, this means that just 17 days of normal railway operations, plus four gala days, will be lost in this three month period. Yes, it will hurt us financially and in terms of our morale potentially too by not running trains at February half term, as well as the long-established Spring Steam Gala, but this is for one year only. So, it’s short-term pain for long-term gain whilst we address the ORR’s action list and tighten up everything which they wish us to improve and also rebuild our business too.

More follows

Whilst the ORR letter to us runs to eight pages, there are actually only some five key points which they've raised with us for action following the inspection, many of which we had already recognised as weaknesses and changes were already underway, such as improvements in safety and infrastructure, tightening up procedures, record keeping and compliance, and staff and director appointments. We will discuss these with you at a staff meeting later this month.

I'm pleased to report that we already have had kind offers of help from the railway media to help us publicise the postponed Spring Gala event, and specific assistance and support from other heritage railway operators, such as the NYMR, Welsh Highland and Tyseley, thereby underscoring the big family relationship which exists in our great heritage railway industry. We aim to upskill our operations in the coming weeks to establish best practice, and a new Acting Chief Mechanical Engineer post will be announced shortly.

As a railway business with a very close eye on safety, we will be focussing on the training and competency of all staff who hold safety critical roles, such as Drivers, Firemen, Guards, Signalmen and other operating staff, so a new SMS will be written shortly and the HOPS system set up to operate correctly.

These two areas have already begun, along with a department by department review and audit. I have also invited the ORR to help deliver some key learning messages to us and assist with our training programme of which mandatory dates will be sent out in due course, also attended by an ORR representative.

Last week, I wrote to you to try and update everyone on the position that has unfolded since the ORR visit, coupled with the expected changes to our organisational culture and the new attitude needed.

We need to get the WSR back onto the highly successful path it has enjoyed for much of the past 40 years, but which has been mired of late with the time-consuming distractions of unnecessary conflicts, unattractive messages and bad feelings and PR, both within the railway and beyond, but also seen by the outside world who rightly wonder what's been going on. We now move forward!

Personally, I have been overwhelmed with the level of support that I have received since my appointment as Chairman and thank everyone who has taken time to write to me offering their support, and with the shared view point that we all wish the WSR to succeed.

It has also been pleasing to see the positive engagement through our support organisations, such as the West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA), one of our support charities, who have just been successful with their £96,000 Hinkley Point Community Fund (HPCF) bid which not only provides an exciting linkage between the WSR and Hinkley Point, but also allow the WSRA to take forward a number of 'wish-list' requests to support the improvement of our railway and its heritage. The WSRA has also been tasked with and agreed to help provide financial fundraising for the railway.

More follows

But in looking forward to embrace the evident changes which are needed to tighten up our procedures to improve and enhance the heritage-based culture and vision of the WSR, I need to be very clear that **WE ALL** need to support these improvements in order to operate a safe, professionally-run railway which is now expected by the regulators in the modern era.

Yes, we have some 1920's and 30's steam locos and mainly 1950's rolling stock with a genuine heritage railway atmosphere of yesteryear which is obviously loved by all of us and our visitors, but we need to upskill in a number of areas to meet 2018 standards and for the future.

Our recent investigation by the ORR should be seen by us as a recognisable positive turning point in our history to demonstrate the absolute changes which the entire heritage railway sector, as a collective group, will need to conform to and deliver in the future.

Our railway has not being singled out by the ORR here, a fact to which other heritage lines will readily attest, but some elements of our Safety Management System (SMS), procedures, corporate governance, appointments and staff responsibilities, plus items of infrastructure, have been identified as requiring updating, action and greater attention going forward. We have to accept that we must do better and that there is no room for complacency.

In my perhaps biased view, the WSR has almost stagnated in recent years and arguably lost sight of being one of the country's premier heritage railways, partly because of political distractions of the recent past.

Having grown ever larger over 40 years into a modern railway might perhaps be seen as being at odds with the vision of those great early WSR pioneers of the 1970's whose herculean efforts secured the WSR for posterity. But the WSR has every ingredient needed to restore that pride and vision again, and it is my earnest wish that we all work together and do so in 2019, our 40th anniversary year.

I have made a strong personal commitment to the ORR, as I do to you too, and the Board that:

- We must turn this business of ours around;
- We must operate in a fully compliant manner to satisfy the ORR;
- We must improve our revenue and cut our costs where we can;
- We must build our business markets further, and focus on the future.

For me, and on reflection, it's all about revisiting the strong foundations of the WSR.

For that reason, the railway will close temporarily for three months and allow us to focus on areas where improvements are needed. To that end, a recovery plan will be drawn up at Board level and with senior management, and then shared with all of you as our colleagues and whom I hope will all support and help make what feels like a long journey achievable. We are going to create a stable platform during the closed period from which we will look to grow again once it is right to do so.

More follows

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I have spoken with members of the Special Events Planning Team which is the WSR's 'Gala committee' and advised them that the Spring Gala has to be cancelled, but that we are looking at holding a Gala at a later date to try and coincide with the 40th Anniversary once a date has been agreed. We will also have to tell and apologise to all of our local accommodation providers about this change who all benefit greatly from visitors to our events, and we hope that this does not affect them too badly.

I must stress that the extended period will not be a holiday for us, anything but that! It will be a very focussed and busy, short period that we will have to get our ship into proper order, and which will fly by in reality. There will be a restructure of all departments taking place early in 2019 in readiness for the coming season.

I wish to see a positive 2019 thereafter, and a season that we will all enjoy, but above all else, operate safely and professionally. We have our 40th year celebration in 2019, so let's make sure it is a celebration to remember and savour!

I do hope this letter is read, received and accepted by you in the context and purpose of which it was written. We have to do better and this will enable the WSR to benefit and become truly great again, and the benchmark for others to follow.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Jones-Pratt

Chairman, on behalf of the WSR plc Board