

Egham's Airtrack protesters rally behind MP

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AIRTRACK protestors have rallied behind their MP after he criticised the county council's decision to provisionally accept a cash payout rather than fighting for an underpass in Egham.

Runnymede & Weybridge MP, Philip Hammond, wrote in his weekly column in The News last week he felt Surrey County Council (SCC) made a 'serious error in judgement' by voting to agree an £11.4million package of traffic improvements in the town, rather than fighting for an underpass under a level crossing, championed by protestors to the multi-million pound airport rail-link.

Residents, businesses and borough councillors all fear traffic congestion at Egham's three level crossings caused by increased barrier down-times due to the eight extra trains per hour Airtrack would provide. They say it will gridlock Egham, and force businesses to leave.

Vice-chairman of Egham Chamber of Commerce, Meher Oliaji, who has lead the campaign for a solution to the traffic congestion problem said it was good to have an MP in-the-know fighting their corner.

She said: "He has actually spoken in Parliament about the Pooley Green level crossing and the difficulties that communities face because the legislation gives Network Rail (then Railtrack) all the power and no requirement to consult or compromise with road users and residents.

"He's had lots of letters from constituents about it and he almost certainly knows more than most of the councillors at SCC about how badly the level crossings affect local people's lives."

Egham Hythe ward councillor, Gill Warner, added: "I have to support Philip Hammond as if it is a case that SCC have taken the money rather than fought it that's not going to help down-times on the level crossings. So if that goes through we have still got a situation that when all the crossings are down we are going to be stuck.

"Philip Hammond has always supported us over Airtrack. This is going to run and run and it's good to know we have him on our side for it." Leader of Runnymede Borough Council, John Furey, who is also a county councillor and a Conservative, was believed to not be pleased with Mr Hammond's criticisms of Surrey's cabinet.

But in a statement realised to the Herald & News on Tuesday, he simply said: "The comments expressed by Mr Hammond are noted by Runnymede Council. The offer extended by BAA, to the County Council, will be considered by Runnymede's Corporate Management Committee during its meetings in October and November, followed by a full Council debate for all its Members.

"The concerns of our residents remain our priority and require a solution that benefits Runnymede. The underpass fails on three important tests, set by the Ministry of Transport, and consequently appears not to be feasible.

"The issue remains the barrier downtime, caused by the manual signalling operations at Feltham Signal Box. It remains our view that there should be, as a minimum, no increase in barrier downtime, and we should work to reduce it.

"This could be achieved by the introduction of 'automatic signals' and the upgrading of the line, by Network Rail. To this end, Runnymede Council will meet with Network Rail, county council colleagues and Mr Hammond, within the coming weeks.

"The offer from BAA to fund road and infrastructure improvements should not be cast aside at this moment, as they also will improve the current situation."