



SBB mulls new TGV service ©Lyria Guy Perrenoud

Swiss rail chief touts TGV linking Zurich and Bern

by Malcolm Curtis
July 19, 2010 | 10:20

Ulrich Gygi, chairman of Swiss Federal Railways (SBB), is enthusiastic about a 2.5-billion project to introduce a TGV line between Bern and Zurich, to cut the time for the journey between the two cities in half. The proposal would require a change in national strategy, however, from one that has focused on expanding passenger capacity rather than adding the ultra-fast trains adopted by neighbouring France, Germany and Italy.

Rail passengers may be able to travel between Zurich and Bern in just half an hour if a plan being considered by **Swiss Federal Railways (SBB)** gets the green light.

SBB is looking at introducing a high-speed train (TGV) between the Swiss political and economic capitals.

Switzerland currently operates such trains in conjunction with French rail company SNCF to link cities in France and Switzerland.

But there are currently no such high-speed trains linking cities within Switzerland.

The German-language Sunday newspaper **Sonntag** revealed a proposal to operate a TGV capable of 320 kilometres an hour, which would cut the one-hour journey between Bern and the country's biggest city in half.

The project, estimated at 2.5 billion francs, would require new track on only part of the route, a 55.4 kilometre section principally through valleys, incorporating 34.7 kilometres of tunnels.

No stations are planned along the proposed line, which would avoid the congestion at the rail hubs of Olten and Aarau.

SBB Chairman Ulrich Gygi is enthusiastic about the project.

"The route seems to be attractive," Gygi told **Sonntag**.

The project "poses a central question that the politicians must decide: is it necessary to be more worried about the increase in transport capacity, or rather favour greater speed for trains?"

Gygi said a clear response needed to be given within the framework of the Rail 2030 project, a masterplan for development of the Swiss rail system.

SBB has more recently put the emphasis on expanding capacity and easing congestion on routes where passengers are sometimes left without a seat at rush hours.

In May, the state-owned rail operator announced its biggest order in history, a 1.9-billion-franc contract with Bombardier to build 59 double-deck trains.

SBB said the new trains will be rolled out in phases from December 2013.

The first will be deployed on InterCity services on the St. Gallen–Zurich–Berne–Geneva and Romanshorn–Zurich–Berne–Brig routes, and on InterRegio services between Zurich and Lucerne.

The double-deckers will be later introduced on other routes throughout Switzerland.

The order comprises 436 fully air-conditioned coaches with over 36,000 seats to replace single-deck carriages.

As part of the deal SBB secured contractual options to order a further 100 such trains from Bombardier.

The trains company estimates it will need 120,000 more seats on its long-distance services.

Meanwhile, it continues to operate old carriages without air conditioning up to 40 years old that it needs to replace.

SBB said it plans to invest 20 billion francs in rolling stock in the next 20 years but until now there has been little talk of introducing TGVs within the country.

Reducing trip time has been an ongoing concern for the railway, however.

Its new double-decker trains will be fitted with a mechanism that allows them to tilt at two degrees on curves allowing journey times to be cut by 10 percent without investing in further track upgrading.

SBB is studying retrofitting the mechanism on all its trains following tests to begin 2013.

But introducing TGVs adds another wrinkle to the plans.

"We must not ignore the projects of our neighbours," Gygi said.

"In France Italy and Germany high-speed lines link with Switzerland. We must be able to connect with them without problems."

