

News Banana Express

To all on this list (sar-L), and especially the many who have expressed their support I attach the following press release issued today:

"On Monday 2 August, Alfred County Railway (ACR), owner and operator of the Banana Express Steam Train, was placed into final liquidation by Spoornet. Even to the last day we had expected common sense to prevail, but this was not to be. We have been kept in the dark about the future of the steam train service and our numerous offers to keep it running - even on a temporary basis - have been either ignored or rejected by both Spoornet and the Municipality.

According to Spoornet's press release - note no mention of "purely a business decision" which was previously given as the reason - it has used track safety to justify this drastic action. I am a professional engineer, with 20 years experience of narrow-gauge track and can assure the public that our track is safe at the speeds which we run trains. This has been confirmed independently on two occasions during the past 12 months by Spoornet's own inspectors. Since the latest increase in road-truck payloads in 1997 we have been lobbying the public sector to help with infrastructure costs, while monitoring the track ourselves - as we have always done. Anyone who now takes over and gets help with the infrastructure, would be advantaged in a way that we were not.

After all the negative publicity given out by both Spoornet and the Municipality to justify their inexplicable actions, the public may be under the mistaken impression that the Banana Express was inefficiently run. In fact, ACR's debts were accumulated while we were serving the community by carrying freight from Harding to Port Shepstone for onward transmission by Spoornet. We were forced to discontinue this unprofitable service in 2001, since when the cost of road freight has doubled.

We would thus prefer to dwell on the commercial success of ACR since restructuring our company to concentrate on tourism. The original Banana Express was started in 1981 by John Tack, South Coast Director of Publicity, with volunteer help from Rotary. When SA Transport Services closed the Harding line in 1986 the train was faced with oblivion until ACR rescued it in 1987.

Since then, by continuously improving our service and the variety of tour packages linked to the train, we have made the Banana Express a global tourism icon. Since restructuring, our company has increasingly settled outstanding debts while maintaining and improving the track and stations, rebuilding and refurbishing carriages and restoring to service two steam locomotives with a third pending. To the best of our knowledge, operating a rural branch line commercially without aid of any kind, and achieving a positive cash flow, is without equal in South Africa and probably is unique.

Even more important is the socio-economic effect of ACR's accomplishment. According to surveys by Hibiscus Coast Tourism, ACR's 22000 passengers in the

six months up to April this year spent R55 million during their stay. The Banana Express's share of that supported more than 300 families.

We are proud of this record of service to the community over the past 17 years and sincerely hope for the sake of the many whose incomes will be affected, including ACR's loyal and able staff, that our world-famous steam train will be running again before long."

Charlie Lewis

Dear customer, Banana Express has now a own homepage: www.babanaexpress.co.za
offline!