

Business

Heavyweights back high-speed rail link

■ Bosses are backing campaign for project

■ Open letter calls on government for roll-out

■ SIMON DONOHUE

NORTH west business heavyweights have thrown their support behind a campaign to ensure that the government commits to a high-speed rail link to London.

The heads of Manchester Airports Group, United Utilities and Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce are among 69 signatories of an open letter to the government calling for the super-fast rail link to be rolled out.

Government consultation on the scheme – dubbed HS2 and estimated at £33bn if it is rolled out first to Birmingham and then the north of England – will be launched next week.

Work on the London to Birmingham section is due to begin in 2015. It is proposed that it will be extended with a “Y” shaped extension beyond Birmingham serving both Manchester and Leeds.

The individuals supporting the open letter to government argue that the new link will boost the British economy, create new jobs and improve growth prospects.

Supporters in and around Greater Manchester include Charlie Cornish, chief executive of Manchester Airports Group, Philip Green, CEO of United Utilities, Clive Emmott, chief

executive of Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, and Michael Oliver, chairman of Cheshire's Oliver Valves.

Nationally, supporters include former CBI boss Lord Digby Jones, Willie Walsh of International Airlines Group and Andy Street of John Lewis.

The letter reads: “We believe the government is right to develop a new high-speed rail line linking the major cities in the Midlands, the north of England and London. A high-speed rail link will give the economy a much needed boost, particularly in the north and Midlands.

“Not only will a high-speed rail link create much needed capacity and reduce journey times, it will also improve connections between airports, help current commuter services, and free up space on existing lines to carry more freight. All this will provide significant help for British business and attract additional new investment.”

Chris Fletcher, deputy chief executive of Greater Manchester Chamber, said: “The development and construction of a new high-speed rail link to London is a crucial part of delivering future



BACKING THE LINK Chris Fletcher, left, and Michael Oliver



economic growth in Manchester and the north west.

“The existing West Coast line is nearing capacity and it is just not viable to transfer traffic to an already under pressure road system, so something dynamic has to happen and we believe high-speed rail is the answer.

“While faster journey times are appealing, we hope that there is real vision used and links made with the Channel Tunnel rail link – HS1 – so that direct access to the Continent can be achieved.”

Professor David Begg, chief

executive of the *Transport Times* and the organiser of the letter, said: “For too long the debate on high-speed rail has been dominated by local opponents but many in business want it developed as soon as possible.

“High-speed rail will be a major boost to the economy, improving our growth and jobs prospects, particularly in the Midlands, the north, and Scotland.”

Mr Oliver said: “If the government is serious about developing business across the UK, it needs to invest in infrastructure to sup-

port it.” And Mr Cornish said: “Our primary aim is to persuade government of the real benefits of bringing High Speed 2 to Greater Manchester. This will complement the other key priority of investing in the Northern Rail hub.

“Together these schemes will greatly improve connections between the airport, Greater Manchester and the UK. Improved rail access is a crucial part of our transport strategy and will help us deliver new long-haul air services.”