

'EURO LINK LOSS A BACKWARD STEP'

JANE BAKOWSKI

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County Councillor Alex King was put on the spot on everything from Kentish apples to European rail links at a meeting in Tunbridge Wells last week (Tuesday 6 November 2007).

Just a week before the opening of the new Ebbsfleet international station spelled the end of the Ashford to Brussels train service and a drastic reduction in services to Paris, the KCC deputy leader admitted: *"For the time being, we have lost the battle."*

Speaking on Kent's international strategy at a **meeting organised by the Tunbridge Wells Twinning and Friendship Association** at St John's Church Centre in St John's Road, Mr King, who represents Tunbridge Wells Rural area, said the sidelining of Ashford was *"a backward step"*.

Responding to a question on the cutbacks from Brian Beeley, of Tunbridge Wells United Nations Association, he said: *"Eurostar has got its market research seriously wrong. We tried to persuade it to run services from both Ashford and Ebbsfleet for a period to see how it developed, but it believe it was competing with airlines, so every five minutes counts."*

Mr King, who often travels to Europe and elsewhere to promote Kent, including a recent trip to the United States, denied a claim by Victor Webb of the UK Independence Party that he was behaving like *"the prime minister of Kent"*. Mr Webb had accused the deputy leader of wasting money on overseas trips which would be better spent on improving roads and other local issues.

However, Mr King insisted: *"We are responsible for making money for Kent."* Noting that the county had lost hundreds of thousands of jobs in recent decades through the closure of its coalmines, dockyards and other industries, he said: *"The county's economy has had to change. We have boosted the income from tourism to £2 billion and created 50,000 jobs. You don't do that by sitting at home."*

In answer to a question from Daniel Bech, of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum, on the sale of foreign apples in local supermarkets, Mr King said: *"The supermarkets are very powerful, but we are slowly succeeding."*