

## **Give priority to links that keep traffic out of town**

*This comment by John Blakeley was first published in the NZ Herald on Tuesday 30 December 2003. It was in reply to an article by Owen McShane on 26 December 2003. Two minor typos are corrected in this version.*

Owen McShane suggested on Boxing Day that building more motorways quickly will solve congestion problems in Auckland. After the announcement of the Government's \$1.62 billion transport funding plan, various political parties and lobby groups gave the strong impression they believed in the same solution.

A careful study of the December 12 announcements made by various Government ministers shows the plan was conceived to better co-ordinate motorway building, improve public transport and apply road congestion charging (or tolls). What is open to debate is the relative weighting to be given to each of these in the overall funding package. Presumably this will be the responsibility of the new Auckland Regional Transport Authority.

Experience overseas and logic suggest that to build new motorways, which will encourage more traffic to enter parts of central Auckland that are already heavily congested, will simply add to the congestion. The new motorways which should, therefore, be funded are those that will effectively move traffic through and around the central-city area, not pour more traffic into it, as the ill-conceived eastern highway project is likely to do.

The completion of the State Highway 20 project through Mt Roskill and the follow-on project through Avondale to link with the North-Western Motorway should have priority. This is because the completed link has the potential to reduce congestion in the Spaghetti Junction area by providing an alternative route through the Auckland isthmus and, therefore, diverting traffic from the central city.

Thus, it is surprising to read that a Transfund review calls for this project to become a candidate for a toll road so it does not become congested.

One of the main objectives of this new link is to reduce congestion elsewhere; to apply a toll on that road when the roads on which it is seeking to reduce congestion remain free, suggests a confusion in objectives between reducing congestion and revenue-gathering.

Could this be because it is more politically acceptable to apply a toll charge to a new road than an existing one?

London has shown that even a primitive road-pricing approach can have a big effect on congestion and, by doing so, bring major economic gains to businesses. Transport planning engineers say that demand-management measures, such as road pricing, will almost certainly be required in future to tackle traffic congestion, particularly when technology makes it possible for tolling to be done without having to stop at a toll booth. This is already being tested in Singapore.

Owen McShane points out that under the new transport plan, petrol tax increases will not be introduced until April 2005, and the Government's contribution will take effect

from July 2005. New motorway construction is, therefore, not going to happen quickly.

Much more rapid relief of congestion may be achieved by implementing measures to make the public transport system more attractive and user-friendly. These could include safer and more attractive suburban railway stations, with adjacent parking space, reliable and punctual train services, more bus lanes, and more co-ordination between trains, buses and ferries.

Why does Auckland still not have unified ticketing? Tickets should be able to be bought from a machine or local shop and stamped on boarding, so users can transfer easily from one transport mode to another. Many large and progressive cities already do this.

The dispersed nature of business suggests Auckland has the potential for a large fleet of radio-controlled minibuses offering a regular door-to-door service to commuters. Would this be too much of a threat to the overly large taxi fleet if it generated a lot of new customers?

In their responses to the Government's package, the National Party leader, Don Brash, Act's spokeswoman, Deborah Coddington, and the Business Roundtable all suggested the application of the Resource Management Act was a root cause of our congestion problems.

But is it? Every new motorway project will have substantial social and environmental costs, as well as economic costs. These must be evaluated and, in some cases, the social and economic cost, as well as the construction cost, will be so large in comparison with the perceived benefits that the project should not proceed. The eastern highway may be a case in point.

In addition, all people who will be seriously affected by a new roading project should have the democratic right for their objections to be heard.

A balance must be achieved, and meeting these requirements is one of the objectives of the Resource Management Act. Although it may have flaws, to do away with it to enable motorways to proceed regardless of consequences would surely not be acceptable to most New Zealanders.

Owen McShane suggests the funding plan will make Auckland less attractive and destroy the city's economy as people and businesses migrate out of the congested and polluted mess. But if motorway projects proceed regardless of consequences, this will add to the polluted and congested mess we have already.

What is required is a balance of building appropriate new motorways, congestion charging and more user-friendly and efficient public transport. It is to be hoped the Auckland Regional Transport Authority will achieve the appropriate balance.

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