

MT MESSENGER BYPASS PROJECT: SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE OF PETER TERENCE MCCOMBS (TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT) FOR THE NZ TRANSPORT AGENCY

1. I have been engaged by the Transport Agency to advise it on the traffic and transport effects of the Project. I prepared the Strategic Transport Assessment (Technical Report 1) for the Project and I also reviewed the Traffic and Transport Assessment (Technical Report 2).

Local Context

2. SH3 to and from the north serves the key strategic purpose of connecting the Taranaki region through to the Waikato. As Taranaki's only arterial connection directly to and from the north, SH3 is of particular importance to the economic well-being and wider future of Taranaki. The route connects Taranaki's oil and gas, agricultural, forestry and engineering products and expertise through to the main economic and transport hubs at Hamilton, Tauranga and Auckland. These connections are vital to Taranaki's ongoing economic performance.
3. The Project is included in the RLTP as a key regional and inter-regional priority.
4. Continued strengthening and growth of the Taranaki economy and population has steadily added pressures and exposed shortcomings within the northern arterial roading connections serving New Plymouth and the wider Taranaki region. With continuing traffic growth and growing reliance on the route, there is an increasingly evident need to attend to the inadequacies and vulnerabilities of the Mt Messenger portion of the route in carrying freight and serving Taranaki's current and future needs.

Existing Corridor Limitations

5. The shortcomings of the existing SH3 corridor arise from fundamental road design problems that are especially evident in the length between Urenui and Piopio where the narrow widths, steep grades, lack of passing opportunities, rock falls, and a poor safety record cause closures and an overall inferior performance that is inconsistent with its wider strategic role.
6. These limitations affect both the existing Awakino Gorge section between Awakino and Mahoenui (where upgrading approvals have now been obtained), and the Mt Messenger length between Uruti and Ahititi that is the focus of this hearing.
7. The practical limitations and vulnerability of the Mt Messenger length of SH3 (Uruti to Ahititi) have long been recognised with road closures brought by rockfalls, landslips, vehicle breakdowns and crashes. In its present form and reflecting the nature of the

terrain, the existing road has steep grades, a narrow width, a winding alignment with tight curves, restricted forward visibility, and limited overtaking opportunities.

8. There are significant lengths with no or only limited shoulders that allow little room for error, breakdowns or passing and bring a particular vulnerability to closure from crashes and weather-related events. The existing physical limitations imposed by the existing two-lane narrow tunnel and its approaches at Mt Messenger (and the single-lane tunnel at Awakino although upgrades for that section have been approved) physically constrain maximum load sizes.

The Project

9. The Project will establish a new 6 km length of SH3 between Uruti and Ahititi, replacing the existing highway at Mt Messenger and overcoming its inadequacies with a new alignment with the following traffic and transport key benefits.
 - (a) reduced average journey time saving of 4:1 minutes for light vehicles and 6:5 minutes for heavy vehicles;
 - (b) more, and safer, passing opportunities (improved forward visibility and opportunities along the whole length (excluding tunnel) versus the current substandard passing and climbing lanes); and
 - (c) greatly improved reliability (and reduced use of alternative routes which add significantly to travel times), with less closures from slips or crashes and reduced maintenance requirements.
12. Further benefits of the new alignment are:
 - (a) a shorter length (6km versus the current 7.4km);
 - (b) improved safety (Star 3 versus the current Star 2);
 - (c) wider lanes (3.5m throughout versus the current of up to 3.4m) and wider shoulders (1.5m outside tunnel versus the current 0.5-1.5m);
 - (d) improved road geometry with:
 - (i) eased curves with a design speed of 100km/h (many curves currently have an advised speed, down to 25km/h) and ensuring that trucks can keep within their lanes around the curves (there are a series of curves in the current road alignment including at the tunnel, where trucks have to track across into the opposite lane);
 - (ii) improved forward visibility of 150m or more versus the current down to 30-40m);

- (iii) the summit of the road reduced by 79m and flatter grades (a maximum of 7.5% versus the current maximum of 12%; and 1.6km being steeper than 6 % compared to 4.8km on the present highway);
- (e) reduced journey times for over-dimension loads by enabling such loads to use SH3 as opposed to a significantly longer (3hr 45 min) journey via Whanganui;
- (f) reduced driver frustration through the above benefits (including the key benefits);
- (g) reduced vehicle operating costs and CO2 emissions; and
- (h) safer provision for active modes such as cycling and improved access to walking tracks.

Project strategic benefits

13. As the only direct arterial highway connection to and from the north, enhancing the safety, resilience and journey time reliability of travel on SH3 will benefit the whole of the Taranaki region, and in particular the growing proportion of heavy traffic carrying freight to and from key economic and transportation hubs to the north. The Project will match the form of the road to its modern-day function and ensure that it can accommodate ongoing future growth.
14. The existing SH3 corridor north and south of Mt Messenger follows relatively open rural valleys. The Project area itself lies within the steep hill country at the Tongaporutu River extending south through to the pastoral flats of the upper Mimi valley.
15. At a national level, the Project strengthens Taranaki's connection to the national network, assists growth and economic development, and improves safety for all of its users. In terms of the wider travel demands it serves, the Project markedly strengthens Taranaki's key regional connection to and from the north, while greatly improving its resilience and reliability.

Submissions

16. A total of 1194 submissions (including 16 late submissions) were received with respect to the project, of which the vast majority were noted as being in support. 18 were noted as being opposed, and three were recorded as being neutral.
17. Those in opposition challenged the ability of the corridor (including the new tunnel) to carry large loads, considered the new route through the valley would not be ideal in terms of safety, and queried why passing lanes are not provided.
18. As I have detailed in my evidence, it is my view that the new road will provide increased safety, amenity and resilience outcomes for the corridor, and the design as proposed is appropriate for the traffic volumes and composition anticipated along the route.

19. Those submissions in support addressed the potential for active modes (such as cycling and improved access to walking tracks) to be considered and acknowledged the Project's contribution to growth and community benefits, improved production, safety, resilience and efficiency for the region. A common theme of the submissions in support was the acknowledgement of the wider regional strategic benefits of the project, well beyond the immediate 6km length of the project area itself.

Section 42A Report

20. As detailed in my evidence, and in particular response to the S42A report:
- (a) the 1.2m wide shoulder in the new tunnel is confirmed as complying with the Building Code provided no more than 170 people are in the tunnel at any one time;
 - (b) in this respect I have assessed the peak occupancy of the tunnel as being 65 persons at any one time, taking into account peak traffic flows and the capacity of a tour bus; and
 - (c) ice and black fog has not been identified as a cause factor in reported crashes along the route.
21. I note, lastly, the S42A report concludes that the improved geometrics, straighter alignment and provision of increased shoulders will improve the safety of SH3 at Mt Messenger and expresses confidence in the Transport Agency's ability to manage any operational concerns that may arise.

Summary

22. It is my view that the Project will deliver improved safety, resilience and efficiency outcomes for the SH3 corridor, and enable economic growth opportunities for the Taranaki Region through improved confidence in the corridor performance.