

MT MESSENGER BYPASS PROJECT: SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE OF ROBERT CRAIG NAPIER (TRANSPORT AGENCY PROJECT MANAGER) FOR THE NZ TRANSPORT AGENCY

1. I was the Mt Messenger Project Manager and Awakino Gorge to Mt Messenger Programme Manager at the NZ Transport Agency until 29 June 2018. Since that time I have remained in contact with the Project team, and up to date with developments in respect of the Project, and I remain authorised to provide evidence on behalf of the Transport Agency.

The existing SH3 and Mt Messenger section

2. SH3 is a strategically important route, both at a regional and national level. It connects the Taranaki region through to the Waikato region, and on to key economic and transportation hubs in Hamilton, Tauranga and Auckland. The route is essential to enabling people and communities of Taranaki to provide for their social, economic, and cultural wellbeing (as explained in the evidence of Mr Peter McCombs, Mr Michael Copeland, and Ms Wendy Turvey).
3. In the Transport Agency's One Network Road Classification, SH3 through to Taranaki is a Regional Road. It makes a significant contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of a region, is a major connector between regions, and provides a critical alternative route to SH1 and SH4.
4. The Transport Agency also has a statutory duty as a lifeline utility provider to maintain its network to function at the fullest possible extent during and after an emergency. SH3 is critical to connectivity between Taranaki and Waikato in emergencies, particularly given the poor quality of the alternative options when SH3 is closed.
5. However, the current standard of SH3 over Mt Messenger, and more broadly the Awakino Gorge to Mt Messenger section of SH3, is not in keeping with its strategic importance. In terms of the Mt Messenger section in particular, the highway has significant constraints and deficiencies that affect its safety, reliability and resilience (as set out in Mr McCombs' evidence).

The Project and the Awakino Gorge to Mt Messenger Programme

6. In early 2016, the Minister of Transport announced that the Project would be funded by the Crown. The intention is that the Project will address the current issues with the Mt Messenger section of SH3, in order to provide an appropriate level of service for this vital piece of regional and national infrastructure.
7. The Project is part of a broader AG2MM Programme, which will provide a safe, fit for purpose transport link between the Taranaki region and the north. Further north the

Transport Agency has lodged resource consent applications and has lodged a NoR for an alteration to the existing designation for the Awakino Gorge Project. In between the Awakino Gorge Project and the Mt Messenger Bypass Project there are numerous safety upgrades being undertaken within the existing SH3 corridor.

8. While the Mt Messenger section is the focus of my evidence, it is important that it is placed in context of the overall AG2MM programme of works, and the overall benefits AG2MM will deliver. AG2MM will provide a safe, fit for purpose transport link (including for oversized vehicles) between the Taranaki region and the north.

The Project objectives and how the Project responds to them

9. The Transport Agency's Project objectives, including under section 171(1) of the RMA, are:
 - (a) to enhance the safety of travel on State Highway 3;
 - (b) to enhance the resilience and journey time reliability of the State highway network;
 - (c) to contribute to enhanced local and regional economic growth and productivity for people and freight by improving connectivity and reducing journey times between the Taranaki and Waikato Regions; and
 - (d) to manage the immediate and long term cultural, social, land use and other environmental impacts of the Project by so far as practicable avoiding, remedying or mitigating any such effects through route and alignment selection, highway design and conditions.
10. The first three Project objectives relate to the identified issues with the existing Mt Messenger section of SH3, and the strategic importance of this route. The fourth Project objective reflects the Transport Agency's focus on managing the potential environmental effects of the Project. At a high level, the Project responds to each of the objectives as follows:
 - (a) the Project's modern and fit-for-purpose highway design will provide for a significant improvement in the safety environment of this section of SH3;
 - (b) the Project will provide for greatly improved reliability for this section of SH3, with fewer closures from slips or crashes, and reduced maintenance requirements. This will in turn provide for greater journey time reliability for people and freight;
 - (c) the provision of the Project, being a modern and fit for purpose design, will greatly improve connectivity across this section of SH3;

- (d) the Project will deliver average one-way journey time savings of 4:05 minutes for light vehicles and 6:28 minutes for heavy vehicles. In conjunction with the other AG2MM improvements, the Project will also provide for significantly reduced journey times for over-dimension loads by enabling those loads to use SH3 as opposed for a significantly longer (3hr 45 min) journey via Whanganui;
- (e) the improved connectivity and reduced journey times in turn will contribute to enhanced local and regional economic growth and productivity for people and freight;
- (f) the need to appropriately manage the potential adverse environmental effects of the Project has been a key focus for me personally, for the Transport Agency, and for the Alliance team. Extensive efforts have been made to that end through the consideration of alternatives for the Project, design efforts, and the development of comprehensive mitigation and offset measures to address the environmental effects of the Project. Those measures will be secured through the proposed framework of conditions and management plans.

Consideration of alternatives

11. The Transport Agency has followed a detailed and thorough process in considering alternatives options for the Project. The MCA led by Mr Roan in 2017 was central to that process. The MCA provided invaluable information to the Transport Agency to inform its decision as requiring authority.

Consultation and engagement

12. Since my involvement with the Project began in 2016, we have been constantly engaging with key stakeholders, and have also followed public engagement processes.
13. We have focussed in particular on Ngāti Tama given their special role as landowners and mana whenua. The Project area traverses Ngāti Tama's rohe, and runs through land returned to Ngāti Tama as cultural redress in its Treaty of Waitangi settlement.
14. I understood from an early stage that it would not be appropriate for the Transport Agency to seek to compulsorily acquire land that had been returned to Ngāti Tama as cultural redress for historic breaches of the Treaty. As such, I knew that the Project would not be able to proceed without Ngāti Tama's support and blessing. The approach to engagement with Ngāti Tama has been one of active collaboration.
15. In addition to Ngāti Tama, there are eight landowners who are directly affected by the Project, in the sense that the Transport Agency needs to acquire some of their land in order to construct the Project. Appropriate and respectful engagement with these landowners (and others who might have been directly affected by other route options)

has been a top priority for me. PWA processes are ongoing with the affected landowners (and we have reached land acquisition agreements with four landowners).

16. DOC is also a key stakeholder, noting its general conservation role and ongoing involvement in respect of the Ngāti Tama land.
17. The public feedback we received highlighted the importance of safety, travel time and resilience for the public. There was also a focus (though I would characterise it as secondary) on properly addressing environmental effects. In my view, the Project responds well to these issues (which align neatly with the Project objectives).
18. Overall, I consider that the work carried out by the Project team in engaging with stakeholders and the wider public translates, in RMA terms, to substantial consultation with potentially affected parties and the wider community.

Submissions and the Section 42A Reports

19. I was extremely pleased to read about the positive acknowledgement in both Section 42A Reports of the Transport Agency's consultation and engagement.
20. Other Transport Agency witnesses respond to specific environmental issues raised in the Section 42A Reports. I note that the NPDC Section 42A Report suggested the provision of a rest area along the Project route. A final decision on this issue will be made by the Transport Agency, in consultation with Ngāti Tama and directly affected landowners.
21. The fact that we received 1,171 submissions (including late submissions) in support of the Project reflects the general support for the Project that I have encountered. It also reflects the overriding theme of the public feedback, which is that the Transport Agency should simply get on and build this much needed improvement to SH3.

The future of the bypassed section of SH3

22. The Transport Agency has initiated a process with NPDC to establish what will happen to the existing section of SH3 that will be bypassed on completion of the Project.

Updates to the Project since the EIC was filed

23. DOC and the Transport Agency jointly sought the deferral of the hearing in order to allow discussions in respect of ecological effects to continue, with the aim of resolving or at least narrowing the issues in play. In addition to discussions with DOC, we also continued our engagement with other key stakeholders. A number of updates to the Project were made following these discussions and an ongoing design refinement exercise, including in particular the significant increase in the proposed pest management area (to 3650ha) and upgraded freshwater structure designs.