

Wellington Street on-ramp – A small piece of infrastructure with a big lot of interest

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ABSTRACT

Who could have thought a change to a motorway on-ramp would generate so much public interest and controversy? Why would it?

The Wellington Street on-ramp in central Auckland is located on New Zealand's busiest stretch of motorway and merges traffic at the southern entry to the recently completed Victoria Park Tunnel

The tunnel was opened to traffic in stages, and when the first two lanes opened the on-ramp was kept closed. The NZTA noticed that the motorway appeared to be operating more efficiently during peak periods.

Recognising that closing the on-ramp could benefit Auckland's network but would also have implications for the local roads and community, the NZTA recognised there was a need to **slow down** the decision making process and **collaborate** and **listen** to the local community and Auckland Transport to better understand the effects fully.

An intensive consultation programme was undertaken over a short timeframe to obtain community views on whether the on-ramp should remain closed or be reopened, and what the effects of these scenarios would be.

The consultation generated significant local, regional and even national interest. With over 700 submissions, clear community preferences and issues became apparent providing NZTA and Auckland Transport with insights to consider.

Importantly, the final decision on the on-ramp's future was heavily influenced by the views of the community rather than solely being a technically driven decision. By working **collaboratively** with the community and technical experts an informed decision was made by NZTA and Auckland Transport who **listened** and responded to the needs of the community.

INTRODUCTION

"Heavyweights join battle to have ramp reopened" NZ Herald 16 May 2012

"Ramping up the fight" North Shore Times 22 May 2012

These headlines are an indication of the strong public opinion expressed at the continued closure of the Wellington Street on-ramp in 2012. This paper reflects on a recent NZTA project that reviewed the function and ultimately the future of the Wellington Street on-ramp - an inner city motorway on-ramp in Auckland's City Centre.

Although the NZTA initially underestimated the public interest in the future of the on-ramp, once the level of interest was realised, they decided to slow down the decision making

process in collaboration with Auckland Transport and the local community to better understand the effects. The purpose of this paper is to share key lessons from the Wellington Street On-Ramp Review and show how relationships with communities can be fostered through an engagement process.

This paper begins by taking an overview of the context of the Wellington Street On-Ramp Review and why a review came about. We describe the review process, the consultation undertaken and the views of the communities affected by the continued closure of the on-ramp. We will show how the community influenced final decision and describe the key lessons and opportunities identified for the future.



Wellington Street on-ramp during VPT construction, Auckland

OVERVIEW

The Victoria Park Tunnel Project (VPT) was the first of the NZTA's Roads of National Significance (RONS) to be built. The VPT Project involved creating Auckland's first urban tunnel and constructing additional motorway lanes in each direction to remove the last major bottleneck in Auckland's central motorway network.

During construction of the VPT project, the Wellington Street on-ramp was closed to accommodate construction works, temporarily re-opened, then closed again as final works were undertaken on the tunnel approach.

The Wellington Street on-ramp is one of only a few motorway entrances for vehicles leaving central Auckland city and wanting to head north over the Harbour Bridge. It is located on the city fringe, adjacent to low rise commercial buildings, high-rise apartment buildings and even some one-two storey residential homes. There are also two schools

within one kilometre of the on-ramp. The on-ramp had approximately 8,000 vehicles per day in 2009.

As a result of the ramp closures, traffic wanting to access the motorway northbound needed to find alternative routes north, through other local on-ramps. Two of these are inner-city ramps and the other located in a residential area.

When the Victoria Park Tunnel was opened in May 2012, the Wellington Street on-ramp remained closed. From the NZTA's perspective, there were some early indications that restricting access at the Wellington Street on-ramp could help the new tunnel, the SH1 motorway and parts of the local road network to operate more efficiently. This was primarily by avoiding the addition of merging traffic at a critical part of the motorway network, allowing the wider motorway network to operate with higher traffic flows. A joint review with Auckland Transport (AT) was commissioned to understand the impacts that the new traffic arrangements were having on the network and how the operation of the on-ramp influenced both the local roads and the motorway.

However, closures of the on-ramp during construction works were always intended to be temporary and the NZTA had previously stated that when the on-ramp closed in May 2011, it would reopen in November 2011. Therefore, the community held an expectation that the Wellington Street on-ramp would indeed re-open. In particular, residents of many surrounding streets were adamant that the on-ramp should re-open to relieve pressure of vehicles queuing on their residential street. The NZTA had underestimated the expectations that the community held around the reopening of the on-ramp. Discussion began to emerge in local papers and on radios from the community, voicing their opinions on the continued closure of the on-ramp.

In response to the growing community discussions, the NZTA recognised that consultation with the community must form a necessary part of the review. In particular, the NZTA sought to understand community opinion in relation to the future of the on-ramp including the benefits and negative effects of the continued closure as well as the community preference to either re-open the on-ramp, remain closed or some other scenario such as a partial opening during certain times of the day.

THE REVIEW

Between May 2012 and the end of July 2012, a working group consisting of NZTA and AT representatives undertook a review of the future use of the on-ramp. As part of the review, the NZTA and AT sought to understand the local impacts of the operation of the ramp and its effect on local communities. The review was intended to be both quantitative and qualitative in that it drew on the evidence-based transport analysis as well as community feedback to inform the decision making.

The review took into account the 'one network' approach between AT and the NZTA which acknowledges the aspirations and initiatives of the Auckland Plan 2012, City Centre Master Plan (CCMP) and Auckland Waterfront Plan. The review also took into account AT's approach to supporting and improving the effectiveness of the city centre transport system, including a reliable and robust passenger transport network and safe and pleasant walking and cycling facilities.

The consultation process was developed using the principles and core values of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). This provided an ideal framework to undertake the consultation because it clearly set out the objectives, methods and timeframes for the consultation which was carried out under extremely tight timeframes.

The engagement period began in June 2012. Letters, FAQs and feedback forms were delivered to residents and businesses within the Ponsonby, Freemans Bay and Herne Bay

areas, along with a range of stakeholders such as local schools, transport and freight operators and emergency services. There were also a number of face to face meetings with residents groups, community board representatives and key stakeholders.

COMMUNITY REVIEW AND RESPONSE

A very high rate of 'submissions' were received during a very short period of time (710 responses between mid-June 2012 through to mid-July 2012). This high response rate reflected the very strong level of community interest in the fate of the on-ramp. Of the feedback received, the majority (72%) sought that the on-ramp reopens. Reasons expressed included:

- Increased traffic volumes and congestion on local streets which led to:
 - Driver and resident frustration;
 - Delays to travel times and associated inconvenience;
 - Rat-running through small residential streets;
 - Reduced accessibility to community facilities and suburban activities;
 - Concerns about safety for motorists, pedestrians and schools (a key concern); and
 - Increased heavy vehicles and trucks using residential and suburban streets. Particular concern was noted during the night time.
- Inconvenience of location of on-ramps and distances needed to be travelled to access to motorway on-ramps – leading to the negative effects identified above;
- Safety concerns – particularly for pedestrians (notably children and elderly) and the impact of traffic on schools. Many noted red-light running, u-turns and excessive speed as factors causing their concerns.
- Environmental concerns associated with increased congestion – noise, air and vibration.

THE TRAFFIC REVIEW AND RESPONSE

The traffic review was undertaken in parallel with the community consultation and showed that the continued closure of the ramp had a measurable impact on the traffic flows on many local roads, particularly those feeding routes to alternative on-ramps such as Curren Street and Beaumont Street. If the Wellington Street on-ramp were to reopen, there would be benefit to the local streets by reducing congestion and improving accessibility to the motorway.

The traffic review concluded that while there was capacity on the motorway to accommodate a reopening of the on-ramp, this capacity would need to be closely managed through vigilant ramp metering to prevent significant disruption to the motorway flows during peak traffic and into the future as demand on the network increases.

A local community group also requested that NZTA and AT engage an independent peer review of the process and outcomes to ensure transparency. The peer reviewer was to provide assurance to interested parties that the decision to open or close the ramp had been made based on sufficient and adequate facts and analysis, and that matters of concern to the potentially affected parties have been adequately identified and considered. NZTA agreed to this request, and a Transport Engineer nominated by the community group was engaged to undertake a peer review. The peer review concluded that the traffic analysis provided sound and adequate data on which to base a decision regarding the

opening or closing of the on-ramp, and sound recommendations for improvements to the local road network.

THE DECISION

In response to the traffic findings and community feedback, the working group recommended that the Wellington Street on-ramp be re-opened. The working group also acknowledged that the on-ramp would require on-going management to maintain the safe and efficient operation of the motorway network.

As a result of the findings of the transport analysis and community engagement responses the project working group recommended the following:

- Open Wellington Street on-ramp with constrained flows in the PM peak;
- Recognise existing performance of the Wellington Street on-ramp is unsustainable in the long-term if the Wellington Street on-ramp is re-opened;
- Monitor Wellington Street on-ramp, SH1 and local road performance into the future;
- Identify opportunities for network wide solutions in the future; and
- Undertake annual reporting back to the public on efficiency of the “one network”.

These recommendations were endorsed by the NZTA and AT senior management at a meeting on 31 July 2012.

People who had made submissions on the review were contacted individually the following week to let them know the outcomes of the review, including reports on transport analysis, community engagement, peer review and an overall summary report. Submitters were invited to comment on the outcomes of the review before a final decision was to be made in 4 weeks' time. The feedback from this period was in support of the findings of the review to re-open the on-ramp. NZTA and AT senior management subsequently decided the on-ramp was to reopen, which occurred 8 October 2012.

KEY LESSONS

So what worked ?

- Building on the relationships with the community developed during VPT, NZTA went back to the community on this particular issue – lesson was building on strong relationships developed for VPT.
- NZTA recognised the potential seriousness of the situation and took action immediately to address it (rather than hoping it would dissipate and go away)
- In doing this NZTA, devoted adequate resource internally and externally to mobilise a specialist consultation and traffic team to manage the process.
- Adopting a recognised consultation framework (IAP2) gave rigour and robustness to the consultation process that was difficult to challenge.
- Importantly, the NZTA listened to the community – this was not a tick-box exercise, rather the community opinion meaningfully informed the decision making process.
- Working collaboratively gave strength to the process and outcomes. This included working with AT, stakeholders, community and inter-disciplinary (traffic specialists and consultation specialists).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by addressing this issue collaboratively with the community and understanding their frustrations and desires, a better outcome was achieved for the community, the NZTA and Auckland Transport. Because of this, the NZTA and AT now have a much better understanding of how future decisions in the area should be managed.