

Trafinz Conference, 5-9 September 2010, Wellington

“Delivering a safe, reliable and sustainable integrated transport system – challenges facing the Wellington Regional Transport Committee”

Fran Wilde, Chair GWRC

Today I want to start by congratulating you on your choice of theme. “10 years to change our world”. This is both optimistic in that changing the world in such a short time is a challenge – and pragmatic in that many of our current transport decisions are made within 10 year funding cycles.

Your focus on transport sustainability in all its forms is critical in relation to pressing issues such as climate change, energy security, road safety, network efficiency and changing societal needs.

The law requires a “*safe, reliable and sustainable integrated transport system*”. Delivering such a system in any region in ten years is a big ask and today I will run through some of the issues from a Wellington perspective.

There are three broad areas that underpin the ability to deliver in any sensible way.

- First is planning. This is the big one because if we get it wrong at the beginning nothing else will flow well
- Second is funding. It goes without saying that funding is always a challenge.
- And third – and perhaps most importantly – is relationships. We need to make sure we have effective relationships and partnerships

Planning

NZ has a multi-tier planning model that includes high level strategies, medium to shorter-term plans and funding plans. There is room for improvement at all levels.

At the highest level we have the legislation, and then the NZ Transport Strategy which is not a statutory document, but does set out the vision and picks up the exact words of the legislation – affordable, integrated, safe, responsive and sustainable.

It also sets some targets around these five objectives that are somewhat optimistic and I don't want to explore them today.

The strategy takes a long term view, which is important for both implementers and operators of networks, and it addresses how the country will respond to significant issues such as climate change, which require persistent and long term commitments.

Because of this long term outlook, continuity is useful. The New Zealand political landscape is littered with the skeletons of national plans and strategies devised by governments of various hues over the years, then killed off by their successors.

Thus it was helpful that when it was elected, the Government chose not to completely abandon the 2008 strategy but rather to tweak its emphasis through the Government Policy Statement.

The GPS is the second formal part of the high level strategy and it has a 10 year timeframe. It sets out how the Government wants to spend its money – within the context of the short to medium term impacts it wants from its investments. The GPS is focussed on actions and is pretty important.

The GPS that the National Party government tabled shortly after the election has added new clarity and highlighted the Government's view of the role of transport as an investment in economic growth and productivity. In Wellington we welcomed this because it supported the emphasis we have in our transport planning.

Underneath these high-level central government strategies sit the Regional Land Transport Strategies. These apply the national vision to regional conditions and bring a long term view on a regional scale

They also enable delivery of the strategic transport outcomes to be coordinated with complementary initiatives outside the transport sector.

To me this is one of the critical elements of successful strategy and it is why planning should be undertaken at a regional level.

For example, the RLTS enables integration with land use management and spatial planning. These are important in themselves but increasingly so as we move inexorably towards ever increasing oil prices and the concept of transit oriented development becomes critical.

There are also other significant decisions being made at a regional level that have a close relationship with transport. One obvious example is the impact of climate change with likely increase in frequency and intensity of weather events and the possibility of inundation of coastal areas.

Basically, to be truly effective, any transport strategy should also link to other regional planning tools and economic development strategies. We link ours with the Wellington Regional Strategy, a non-statutory regime developed as collaboration between all the TAs and the Regional Council, focussed on sustainable economic outcomes.

We also link our RLTS to the Regional Policy Statement which is a heavyweight amongst resource management planning tools, dictating to a large extent the “what” and the “how” of district plans.

The Wellington RPS is unique in that it explicitly directs the RLTS to contain objectives and policies that support compact, well designed and sustainable urban form – a first for NZ and a strong directive to integrate transport with land use planning.

Lastly – and very importantly – an RLTS should provide for a multi-modal, integrated network approach. This is absolutely vital in metro areas, where public transport, arterial roads (whether or not they are state highways) and walking and cycling networks need to work together to be able to move people safely and efficiently.

Also, I believe that Travel Demand Management could be one of the most effective tools available to make our communities run more efficiently, but is one of the hardest areas to deliver. It's all about changing behaviour – both individual behaviour and, more importantly, institutional behaviour.

So it takes a lot of time - but there are successes which indicate that people can change. Yesterday you saw the presentation from Clare and Simon on Carpooling and the Walking and Cycling Journey Planner. And I should take this opportunity to thank you for the award presented to greater Wellington last night.

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Still on planning, a key issue is having the right people around the table.

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This membership is what gives the strategies a useful governance link to TAs and their District Plans as well as other community interest and activities.

High level NZTA presence also enables the sharing of regional and local issues, as does the presence of what are called 'interest' representatives from area such as health where there are complementary interests in transport operations and outcomes.

It is in the area of much shorter term Operational Plans (up to ten years – your time frame) that planning arrangements are less well established.

There is no statutory requirement to prepare operational plans, except for public transport. This seems a bit odd given the ability to get things wrong if arbitrary decisions are made – and, conversely, how useful they are when you do have them.

In Wellington we have a series of regional activity and corridor plans that specify projects, agency responsibility and timing to achieve desired outcomes for road safety, walking, cycling, freight, travel demand management and, most importantly, for four major corridors - Western, Hutt, Wairarapa, Wellington City. This is a type of matrix approach, combining geography and mode.

A key aim of our corridor plans is to bridge the gap between long term planning and short term funding and provide some certainty on what will be done to achieve long term outcomes.

However, one of the biggest challenges historically has been long lead times - especially for large-scale projects. Typically, studies were repeated and repeated to update information, engage with a new generation of neighbours, respond to new funding policies - etc etc.....only to find that by time it was planned to actually begin, things had changed.

Timing is also a problem for the public when they are assaulted with wave after wave of consultation. In fact, it became clear some time ago that the consultation required by statute was increasingly resulting in consultation fatigue. Often those who do respond are the same people we see all the time - while in the wider community there is a sense of genuine puzzlement or even resignation.

The new government has taken this issue seriously. In our region the announcement of the RONS programme, which will eventually see a major upgrading of SH1 from Wellington Airport to Levin north of Wellington, has seen more decisions and activity on the roading front than we have experienced for years.

Ironically, the fast track approach of the Government on the Wellington RONS has generated much criticism amongst parts of the community who felt that they were given virtually no say at all.

I know that the NZTA officials are acutely aware of the need to take the community with them and it would be good to reach a happy medium between the old way of no action at all, on the one hand, and sufficient consultation to get healthy community support for a project – and perhaps better outcomes through listening, on the other.

Of course total support will always be impossible but there is a level of consultation that is both useful and necessary for projects that have a big impact on the community.

Its worth noting that the EPA is also making some changes in this area by taking on the RMA process for large or complex projects of national significance, such as our own Transmission Gully.

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Understanding what environmental sustainability means is tricky. Does this mean not doing any damage? Or actually enhancing the environment? Some say any road improvements simply facilitate more gas guzzling vehicles in a society that already has amongst the highest per capita car ownership in the world.

Others agree that getting rid of pinch points and having traffic flowing more easily eases congestion thus decreasing harmful emissions. I'm not going to enter that debate today – I'd need another hour for the presentation!

So just to finish off the requirements for the transport system, it's worth noting that transport is also required to be reliable.

In Wellington it would be considered an oxymoron to talk about reliable trains.

But cutting through the media hype, the fact is that the transport system – both road and public transport - does have to be reliable. If it is not there is a huge economic and social cost.

We are planning for – and right now delivering – a more reliable system. As well as the transport corridor planning work and the funding of the RONS and other roading projects, we are currently in the middle of a billion dollar expenditure programme to buy new trains and renew the rail network. We are investing in real time information and planning more efficient and effective PT routes, as well as better modal integration.

The second big issue is of course funding.

A bit of perspective is required firstly about affordability in NZ.

Funding is challenged by having a population similar to that of Sydney, a land area about the same size as the UK and Japan, roading aspirations similar to American freeways, public transport aspirations similar to Scandinavia, and an infrastructure deficit and the economic wherewithal of, well, of New Zealand!

Unfortunately, our road and rail infrastructure doesn't cost any less because compared with elsewhere there are fewer of us using it. And it's not just infrastructure – ongoing public services are costing more because the community simply wants more.

The issue of affordability means trade-offs and rationing.

And promotion of active modes, while important in terms of sustainable transport outcomes, is not going to of itself fill the gap. The 50,000 or so people a day commuting into Wellington by road, rail and bus – some from up to 100 kms away - won't be walking or biking any time soon.

We simply have to choose what is most important – and who should pay for it. Sounds simple but it isn't! So what are the options?

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While spending on RONS is welcome, this raises issues for those areas where roads do not qualify - particularly hard pressed are smaller rural councils who need to build and maintain roads for those Fonterra tankers which play such an important role in keeping NZ's economy going. Also it raises issues round the ability of councils to build the required walking and cycling infrastructure – and that all-important Travel Demand Management.

Two years ago I said at a conference that road pricing could be an option in the future but the debate clearly has some way to go. The situation hasn't changed since then. Of course congestion charging assumes that there are alternative means of transport for commuters. In Wellington our PT is full to the gunnels at peak time and although we work hard at TDM it is difficult to get businesses to change start and finish times on any scale.

Another part of the funding puzzle is that at local or regional levels, it is perceived that investment decision-making processes by central government don't always take into account intangible costs and benefits.

Wellington has high public transport use with 30 – 40m trips a year. But our existing rail infrastructure is under serious pressure. While the current major investment will be a big help, we are will still need significant additional investment to maintain the network and achieve the levels of service expected by the public.

Serious travel time delays have a direct impact on productivity and thus a real economic impact - just what the Government says it wants to target via the GPS. However, it is much easier in our funding regime to quantify the economic impact of unreliable locomotives for the milk or the coal trains than for the commuters.

In the context of funding and affordability, regional programmes give the opportunity to put all projects “on the table” and decide priorities, against regional strategies and plans. If well devised, they should provide clarity and some certainty for project timings and thus help the government with its national funding decisions and prioritisation of investment.

I guess my main point is that we need to put more effort into getting these programmes right within a partnership approach.

The final issue I want to mention in the funding context is PPPs. I'm not an expert in this area but did use a type of PPP when I was Mayor of Wellington to build the wastewater treatment plant – mainly as a risk management tool. But I rather think that at least we need to resolve our road pricing model on a national scale before we start signing up to multiple PPPs, so everyone knows the long term rules of the game.

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Funding is a hard nut to crack, but equally important is building effective partnerships.

There are many public and private sector organisations involved in delivering our transport system.

Although having a clear and formalised working structure is an immensely useful starting point, in a multi-party endeavour the utility of a good structure can effectively be destroyed without true collaboration.

In fact, I tend to think that good relationships can transcend poor structure and, as in any commercial contractual situation, the best things happen when you are able to leave the contract in the drawer.

Ideally, relationships between the various organisations involved in transport have to be conducted at all levels including governance, senior management, planning staff and technical staff, because the idea of collaboration needs to permeate the culture of the entities involved.

The key requirements are alignment of objectives, the development of trust and, of course, transparency.

Transparency is critical – a “no surprises” culture that acknowledges when things aren’t going so well and invites joint solutions. This will build confidence in the decision making of the other partner or partners and is critical to achieve an integrated network

Multiple modes are not easy to manage, much less when other non-transport interest also need to be factored in - and all partners need to understand what is going on in other parts of the system and the impact of their actions.

In our region as others there are a number of key relationships. One of our important ones is with the NZTA. I think this is working out reasonably well though we do find surprising gaps in understanding in parts of NZTA every now and again.

As I said earlier, we are now also entering into a relationship with the EPA on our biggest roading project. Transmission Gully is the first plan change to be called in under the new arrangements and the credibility of all parties – NZTA, the EPA and Greater Wellington – is at stake.

It is very important to make sure it works but because we are in a guinea pig situation we are having to jointly work out many details of the process which are not provided in the statute.

We also have relationships with other local government entities and generally it works reasonably well at both governance and officer levels. Our 17 member RTC provides an opportunity for robust debate (an opportunity that is taken often) and at the end of the day we have reached our decisions without compromising good transport management principles.

An equally important relationship is the private sector - a range of consultants, contractors and providers. They deliver the plans and are the public face of services. When delivery falls below standard it causes real problems for their customers – and thus for us because the customers are our residents and ratepayers.

Lastly, but most importantly, there is a fundamental relationship for all transport organisations - with the community. Planning reflects community expectations and needs - and ultimately it is the community that pays for the network in some way or other. Delivery of projects therefore must accommodate as much as possible any significant concerns.

For local government this is our mandate and culture.

If we get everything right there is a sporting chance we will not slip behind any further in terms of providing for future transport needs. I don't think that New Zealand will ever have the wherewithal to get ahead of the game – that's not being pessimistic, just realistic in a population of our size.

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