

A Holiday Think Piece

A holiday break allows the brain to explore less routine territory providing opportunities to be inventive or more questioning than might normally be the case. I have been pondering the Council's current strategic direction expressed succinctly as a sustainable region and the role transport might play towards achieving this outcome. Of course I am not necessarily alone in having some difficulty in expressing, in common terms, what would constitute a sustainable region. I do recognise that it is a whole set of outcomes that are closely linked.

It is clear to me that achieving a sustainable region is not just a matter of doing the right thing. It is obvious that there are some cause and effect linkages between transport, land use, the environment, but these are insignificant within the framework of human endeavour which results from societal values and needs, some of which clearly only exist because of the democratic nature of our political systems and the gross consumerism of a market driven world.

In transport it is a fallacy to suggest that there is something called a sustainable transport system that is somehow independent from the rest of the economic, environmental and social activities of our lives.

We have come to expect ready access to commodities that may be produced far away and to be able to transport ourselves at a moment's notice and reasonable cost to every part of the globe. This level of access and mobility is seen as a given in our current communities, it is a fact of life. If sustainable transport means people travelling less or using modes other than private cars more often it must not be at the expense of a reduction in personal access and mobility.

Our current transport plans for the region achieve a reduction in access and mobility. Our current support programme for passenger transport aims to retain the relative mode share between the car and public transport. These plans and programmes do not deliver sustainable transport.

We need a revolution to break away from more of the same which is leading to a worsening overall transport performance. If we are to reduce the ongoing dependence on car use there has to be a major change in the way our society operates. We need a more aggressive approach to the problem than our current incremental change approach that while it may be heading in the right direction will fail to reach the target because our efforts will be swamped by travel growth fuelled by our own individual behaviour.

There are three approaches to our problem:

- evolutionary change
- revolutionary change
- technological change

Integrated transport policy underpins both evolutionary and revolutionary change. We do have an integrated transport plan now but it will only deliver a less unsustainable outcome than no plan at all. This does not appear satisfactory but appears to be the way New Zealand is playing the game.

The current government encouraged passenger transport patronage growth in 2000 but the new funding scheme from Transport has watered down the patronage growth incentives as they were seen as unsustainable, a strange play on words I think.

Just encouraging people to stop driving and to use alternatives is unlikely to make much difference. To date all we appear to have achieved is to slow the rot, a very credible achievement when you look back 20 years or so and see the drastic decline in passenger transport use that occurred in the 1970s. There are still some opportunities to change behaviours through, for example 'smart travel' programmes, the targeting of people through individual approaches to change their travel patterns by providing information on how to use alternative modes for some journeys.

We appear to be exhausting the "better use of existing resources" approach which looks to maximise road capacity through traffic flow improvements. More bus lanes in key locations may be still warranted. Evolutionary change can only be successful in the long term if our community is prepared to seek an alternative lifestyle with different societal values. If people were to buy into the concept of a sustainable region in the fullest sense then they would recognise the need to have a different lifestyle and travel differently. I don't think we can wait that long.

There are some societies where transport use is entirely different to ours. One example is Singapore. Here the majority daily use passenger transport rather than private cars. This is achieved in three ways by providing cheap, frequent, accessible, quality passenger transport services, charging car users through tolls and taxes, and restricting the number of cars.

For us to emulate Singapore we would need revolutionary rather than evolutionary policies. We would need to provide a level of passenger transport service several times higher than we currently provide. Investment in passenger transport infrastructure and services would need to at least match the region's investment in new roading. The second step would be charging more for private car travel through tolls and congestion pricing.

We need to consider revolution when we review our regional land transport. The community needs to see that current transport policy will not deliver them an improved level of access and mobility. They need to understand the choices they have, how will it impact on their lifestyle and how much they will cost. Should we continue the evolution approach or should we be revolutionary and if so how revolutionary do we want to be.

If we were to take the revolutionary path we would need to operate transport in a much more integrated way. We would need to embrace the new Land Transport Act and promote the package approach at the corridor level. We would need to fully integrate roading and passenger transport investments.

The Auckland governance 'solution' of a regional transport authority may be necessary here in Wellington to ensure true integration across modes. The current framework could be made to work if there was the political will. The corridor plan concept we have developed could, if implemented, provide the integration we are seeking. The key must be to get the plan accepted by all, this is of course a difficult task and more so if we chose to go the revolutionary way.

The third way forward is to await the next technological change. We all know we cannot build our way out of congestion, the idea of providing mode alternatives has not halted the increase in congestion. What is needed is a new travel mode. If we are to retain our current lifestyles and values the new mode needs to protect our privacy as well as be low emission, environmentally benign and fast. It cannot rely on mass command travel or changes to society that remove individualism. There are fanciful ideas of personal rapid transport systems, much is being currently achieved in guided systems to suggest the possibility of increasing road capacity several fold without any new road building. The resistance to these possibilities is likely to be the human interface. But we should not dismiss the possibility. Should we therefore just sit and wait for this new technology to arrive to maintain our lifestyle?

I for one expected telecommunications of all kinds, the video conference, computer systems integration providing complete access to all information to have a profound effect on the way we interact with others. I used to know the bank tellers by name and they knew me, now I rarely visit a bank. Surely this change will continue unabated.

So is there any conclusion in all of this. We are hooked onto the use of the private car as the way we operate in the present society that we choose to support. We can persuade some to use alternative modes for certain travel as long as it does not reduce their opportunities to participate in society. We can use current transport resources more efficiently. However the long term result will be a reduction in overall accessibility and mobility. The only way to a sustainable future is either through taking a revolutionary approach by the provision of greatly improved mode alternatives and charging private car users heavily or taking the technological route which will either result in a new mode or travel reduction requirements through innovative use of telecommunications, the latter being achievable only by a shift in lifestyle through a reduction in physical human contact.

My expectation is that there will be a lifestyle switch enabling telecommunications to fill the gap driven by heavy charging of private car use and better passenger transport provision.

So, for what it is worth, my conclusion from this holiday thinking is that our future transport plans need to include:

- greater investment in passenger transport infrastructure, at least to a level equivalent to our investment in roads
- early introduction of road space charges by location and time of day through tolls and congestion pricing
- greater integration between transport agencies to achieve agreed outcomes
- support for ongoing growth in e-business.