Greater Wellington
Te Pane Matua Taiao

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Tēnā koe,

ETCS – rail technology to help move more people and goods safely around the region

In recent weeks, I've appreciated the opportunity to meet with a range of representatives from different political parties about sustainable investment and co-investment in public transport and flood protection respectively.

A common theme of these conversations has been investment in the Wellington rail network. One of the questions raised has been about the European Train Control System (or ETCS) and how it would benefit passengers and freight customers in the Wellington region and Lower North Island by enabling more train services to run more safely around the region.

As you may know our ambition at Greater Wellington Regional Council for Wellington's metropolitan rail network is to offer a 'turn up and go' service, with trains running as frequently as every 10 minutes on key railway lines. This is set out in our Wellington Rail Programme Business Case.

Achieving increased frequency and reliability of train services on a network impacted by years of under investment in renewals and maintenance and subsequent speed restrictions is possible. It will require significant investment by the Crown via KiwiRail in replacing our ageing signalling system, which is near the end of its useful life, with the latest proven technology. That technology is the European Train Control System or ETCS.

As the Wellington region and Lower North Island sub region grows, we want a modern rail system that can safely and reliably accommodate more frequent services. This would make public transport a more attractive and practical choice for more people.

Investment in a modern signalling system that is fit for the future and enables more frequent services connecting the capital city to the wider Lower North Island sub region is an important step towards that.

Train and signaling control may sound like a technical matter of little interest to the public. But in plain language it's the nerve system of a railway.

First and foremost, investing in train and signaling control is about keeping passengers and rail staff safe and preventing accidents. However, it's also about better managing disruption to services and making the most efficient use of a busy network of railway lines used by trains carrying passengers and freight every day.

Last year, KiwiRail put forward a detailed business case for replacing Wellington's ageing rail signalling system. This was reviewed by NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi and transport officials. KiwiRail's preferred option is a modern signalling system known as ETCS Level 2. KiwiRail is now preparing an update that looks at another option, and that update is expected to be submitted for review in August.

We urge NZTA and MCERT to approach this with their eyes wide open and undertake a robust assessment of whether any option, other than ETCS Level 2, can deliver equivalent operational benefits and to be transparent about any resulting compromises in network capacity, reliability, resilience, and safety. Because those compromises will play out operationally for Greater Wellington and the region's passengers and ratepayers. For example, at ETCS level 2 the region's numerous temporary speed restrictions can be managed by in-cab technology and controls rather than relying on locally installed track infrastructure for each speed restriction.

The key decision is not which option (or level of ETCS) has the lowest initial price tag – it is a major investment regardless of the level of ETCS the Crown opts for. It is which option delivers the greatest value and operational benefits over the next 30 or 40 years.

Auckland already operates with the European Train Control System (ETCS) and is looking at moving from Level 1 to a higher level of protection and performance. Wellington should be careful about investing in technology at Level 1, that may be yesterday's solution.

We would appreciate your support for timely Crown investment in the European Train Control System (ETCS) at the right level for Wellington region. Basically, do it once and do it right.

Ngā mihi

Daran Ponter

Chair

Greater Wellington Regional Council