

DRIVING INTO TROUBLE

Motorway traffic in Auckland is declining, public transport use is at a 25-year high and growing, and oil production is expected to peak within 10 years. So we're building more motorways. Simon Wilson asks why.

There's a kind of "aw shucks" diffidence to Transport Minister Steven Joyce: the shy little boy scuffing his shoes in the dirt, wrapped in the body of one of the most powerful people in Cabinet. When he talks, his voice is soft, his manner moderate. His initiatives in Auckland, he makes you want to believe, are "no brainers". It's a favourite phrase.

But Joyce's plans for Auckland are not moderate. He is spending around \$1 billion a year on motorways in one of the biggest road-building programmes in our history, and at the same time he has stopped or put on hold nearly 80 per cent of the funding previously allocated to new public transport.

In particular, the transformative projects of rail electrification and integrated ticketing have been held up, and we will miss the economic opportunities they might have provided during the Rugby World Cup in 2011. We are now spending \$7 on roads for every \$1 on public transport. In Australia, the ratio is close to 1:1.

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There's a two-part logic to Joyce's motorway projects. "I think they will ease congestion," he says. And he argues that they put the focus on "immediate economic growth".

"Rail is hugely important," he told Auckland's Regional Transport Committee (RTC) in early August. But nothing else he has said suggests he believes this. He also told the meeting, "We don't want to artificially move from one sector to another and sacrifice short-term productivity gains." The Government believes that because people mainly use roads now, it makes sense to build more of them.

There's also a larger challenge, defined by Prime Minister John Key in July when he addressed an audience of rail managers and local politicians in New Lynn. "We're on our way to an Auckland population of two million," said Key. "This region will be the home of nearly all migration into the country."

That means all the roads, rail lines, bus networks, ferry services, bridges and tunnels we plan and build now have to be geared to this kind of growth. But while there is a plan for motorways, based on the designation of several "Roads

of National Significance" (RoNS), there is no overall strategic transport plan.

The Auckland Regional Council (ARC) has been developing such a plan, but Joyce is unimpressed even by its quite modest public transport targets: "It is completely unsustainable to reduce single-occupant vehicle trips by 10 per cent by 2015."

This was on the same day the Auckland Regional Transport Authority (ARTA) announced rail and bus trips to June this year had reached a 25-year high.

Even the RoNS plan lacks strategic depth. When the roads were announced, most had no cost-benefit analysis. The Puhoi-to-Wellsford motorway still hasn't.

Auckland Central MP Nikki Kaye campaigned in the general election last year for a better deal for Auckland public transport, but she has not continued with that message. She now says the minister is doing a good job. "He steps outside the box and takes risks." When we asked what risks Joyce was taking by building more roads, she said she "wasn't thinking of anything in particular".

Joyce says he wants the job of producing a new integrated strategic plan for Auckland transport to fall to the Auckland Council, to be elected next year, and he expects the Cabinet will agree. That makes good sense.

He also says, "The debate of roads versus rail is long past. I get very bored with it." Which doesn't explain why he has allocated so much money to motorways at the expense of rail — especially as those motorway projects will neither relieve congestion nor serve the economy well. Here's why...

THE CONGESTION PROBLEM

Motorways don't relieve congestion, they create it. It might seem counter-intuitive, but the phenomenon has been observed all over the world and is generally not disputed by transport planners. "It's because the more roads you build, the more you encourage people to drive," says former Auckland City councillor and transport/urban design analyst Richard Simpson.

Even the NZ Transport Agency, which plans our major roading projects, expects the Waterview connection on SH20 to be full pretty much from the day it opens in 2015.

Joyce told *Metro* his construction programme will essentially bring the Auckland motorway "corridors" to capacity and there won't be much more to do when it's finished. But as Simpson points out, because motorways create congestion, the job of "improving" them is never-ending. "All you are doing is pushing the bottlenecks around." When the Victoria Park tunnel is finished, there will be more blockages in Spaghetti Junction, and then heading to Newmarket, and at Sylvia Park...

The way to relieve congestion, says Cameron Pitches of the Campaign for Better Transport, is not to build more roads but to take cars off them. And to do this, you need good alternatives.

THE TREND WITH TRAINS AND BUSES

Motorway use is not growing. Where alternatives have been developed, it's declining. As Chris Darby, a North Shore councillor and member of the RTC, points out, 2009 petrol sales in Auckland have fallen to 2003 levels.

Oil-price rises last year pushed a lot of people onto buses and trains, and many have not gone back. The upgraded — but still unfinished — Western Line provides a better service. Student rides on public transport are up 75 per cent. Most of all, the Northern Busway has restored bus patronage between the North Shore and Auckland to levels not seen since the mid-1980s — before the introduction of cheap imported cars. Last year, according to ARC chair Mike Lee, the busway reduced the number of vehicles on the harbour bridge by almost the equivalent of a whole lane of traffic.

Mark Ford, until recently chair of ARTA, agrees. In his 2009 report he wrote: "Where there has been investment, there has been growth on rail and bus." And always, adds Cameron Pitches, that growth is beyond expectations.

And let's not forget the other problems related to motorways. The Ministry for the Environment (MfE) says our fuel emissions have risen 76 per cent since 1990, which puts us way off the pace in countering climate change. The Government's own target for reducing emissions will require far less carbon from cars. As for health, the ARC says some 250 Aucklanders die prematurely each year from illnesses related to vehicle emissions.

In cities like San Francisco, Birmingham, Portland and Seoul, the switch to public transport has been so successful they have pulled up some of their motorways.

YES, IT IS THE ECONOMY

Peak oil is coming. The International Energy Agency, reporting to the OECD, says most major oilfields have already passed peak production and we've got about 10 years before the world's oil starts to run out.

That's the same timeframe as Steven Joyce's motorway programme, designed to promote "short-term productivity gains". Within that timeframe, if all else remains the same, prices will rise sharply. We'll have to stop driving as much as we do, and we'll also have to stop carrying most of the country's freight by road.

Joyce simply doesn't believe it. He expects prices to rise but believes technological innovation in fuels and vehicles will limit the damage. Besides, he told the RTC, "Demand [for petrol] is not much affected by price," although that is not the view of the MfE and was clearly not the experience with the oil-price spikes last year. He added, "I don't see people sacrificing their personal mobility simply because the petrol price goes up."

Later, he told *Metro* he would happily "have a side bet that people will be as dependent on private transport in 10 years as they are now".

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That's the heart of it. Either you believe we can proceed as we are, because somehow things will work out, or you think it's time for a new approach to Auckland's transport woes. Mind you, Joyce's "side bet" could be a self-fulfilling prophecy: if you never provide the commuters of Botany or Mt Wellington with good public transport, they will have to keep driving.

Funding arrangements for some public transport projects — including rail electrification and integrated ticketing — will be announced soon. But Joyce made his position clear when he warned the RTC "we must get value for money" and do "full costings". He lacks confidence in public transport. Roads, he says, are "undoubtedly" the most cost-efficient form of travel, because car rides are not subsidised.


Inasmuch as there is a strategy, it is to build more roads and add public transport to cope with surplus demand. The critics say it's the wrong way round.


Cameron Pitches: "We know public transport won't work for everybody. But when it does, it helps everyone." Every driver off the road makes it easier for those still there. Every container carried by rail frees the highways for those that have to go by truck.


Auckland City Council transport manager Brian Tomlinson says bluntly, "In all honesty, we're behind the rest of the world."

The Motorway Programme

The Government is spending between \$9.15 billion and \$12.2 billion over 10 years on new motorway construction in Auckland. It includes:

 Finishing the 48km ring route around Auckland, from Manukau out to State Highway 20, over a widened Mangere Bridge, through Auckland's western suburbs on to a widened Northwestern Motorway (SH16) and through Greenhithe on an extended Upper Harbour Highway (SH18) to rejoin SH1 just south of Albany. The Waterview component of this, joining Mt Roskill with Pt Chevalier, will be partly in tunnels.

 Enlarging SH1 with new viaduct lanes at Newmarket, a tunnel under Victoria Park and extra lanes around St Marys Bay, and extending the motorway from Puhoi to Wellsford. Work on Victoria Park is starting now.

 A third harbour crossing, for which the favoured plan currently is tunnels. But this is not yet planned or costed and further decisions are due.

HOW TO FIX AUCKLAND TRANSPORT IN 3 EASY STEPS

Okay, in transport nothing is *that* easy. But here are three things that would have a decisive impact...

1 Build the Metro

You can't do much without rail. During an hour at peak time, says ARTA, a motorway lane carries 2400 people and a dedicated busway can carry 12,000, while a rail corridor can carry 25,000.

And in Auckland, the foundation of that platform is the CBD Rail Loop, which ARC strategic documents call "a European-style Metro". The plans have existed for years: an underground line extending beyond the back wall of the Britomart station, up through the city beneath Albert St, across Karangahape Rd and Spaghetti Junction and joining the Western Line at Kingsland or Mt Eden. It is currently costed at \$2 billion.

Why is it important? Because Britomart is a dysfunctional terminal. It has only two lines, which limits train movements to 15-minute intervals, and at peak times it's almost full. But if the lines ran straight through Britomart, trains could run every three minutes. The Metro, therefore, is the precondition not just for more trains on existing lines but for new lines — to the airport (a project currently opposed by the airport company, which makes much of its money from carparking), to the North Shore on a new harbour crossing, and out east feeding into the eastern and southern lines. It's the key to linking up the whole city. If you live in Albany or Glen Innes, you could work at Unitec or go to the movies in Newmarket and catch a train to get there.

It's a popular project among local body politicians: Auckland Mayor John Banks (once the city's quintessential roads advocate) is a strong supporter, as is ARC chair Mike Lee, as are the Labour and Green parties. Councillor Ken Baguley, chair of the Auckland City Council's transport committee, says the CBD Rail Loop is the priority. He believes the loop is so widely accepted, "it's not even a political issue any more".

Steven Joyce says, "I haven't formed a position on it."

2 Put marketers in charge

Public transport isn't — shouldn't be — about waiting on cold empty platforms for rattly old trains that may not come. It has to be convenient, comfortable, safe, cheap and reliable. And you have to know you can just "turn up and go", with a train every three to five minutes so you don't need a timetable.

The engineers and policy wonks in the transport sector know all this. As a rule, they are insightful and passionate, and they know all about switching technology and cost-benefit ratios.

But they don't know so much about why people will switch to the bus or train in the first place. Making passengers wait on cold platforms when the train is sitting right there (Britomart), subjecting them to an endless video loop of *Pimp My Ride* (the Link bus) and running an evening service once an hour (Western Line) all carry an implicit message: they don't care about you.

Marketers understand better than most how wrong this is. They know how to ask hard questions about quality of service, and that even if quality is high, the whole thing also has to be cool.

It's easy enough to think of potential campaigns. How do you make the Link bus the method of choice for getting around town on business? Could you give companies incentives to replace subsidised staff parking with public transport discounts?

The ARC wants to quadruple public-transport use over the next 30 years. Actually, given population growth, that's modest. If the new Auckland Council turned to good marketing people and asked, "How do we hit that target within 10 years?" they'd get some pretty exciting answers.

3 Join up all the thinking

When a Government announces emissions reduction targets while encouraging people to drive, the thinking is clearly not joined up. But there's more. Steven Joyce says the Waterview extension is a "no-brainer", yet how does it rank when all the options for easing congestion are weighed together? We don't know, because decisions on road and rail are made separately. National — like Labour before it — has accepted the road lobby's argument that road taxes should be spent on roads. Therefore, the NZ Transport Agency prioritises and funds road-building, while in a separate exercise the Treasury funds rail.

Ken Baguley points out that it's not even an argument about money. He says Joyce's \$1 billion a year for motorways should be pooled with existing public transport funding and allocated according to an overall set of priorities. "It shouldn't be that contentious," he says. "We line up the projects, do the comparative benefit analysis, and proceed accordingly."

Steven Joyce agrees that spending petrol taxes on rail "reduces congestion, so you [the motorist] should be prepared to pay for that". But he says he likes the funding set-up the way it is.

Should transport be planned within the larger context of other urban planning? If that seems obvious, why were Botany Downs and Flat Bush developed with no rail and a skeleton bus service? The corner of Pakuranga Rd/Ti Rakau Drive is now the busiest non-motorway intersection in the country. Few cities anywhere build big new urban centres like this.

And should rail, bus and ferry services be required to complement each other in timetables, prices and ticketing? Joyce says he likes the current arrangement, which encourages them to compete. "I believe competition breeds innovation," he says.

TRANSPORT WILL BE an election issue for the new Auckland Council in 2010. The Victoria Park tunnel will be under way and work may have started on Waterview. Debate will have re-surfaced on the third harbour crossing and the Government will have announced new funding mechanisms for some deferred public transport projects. But it won't be nearly enough.

The new council will need to prepare an integrated strategy. That task is urgent. We'd like to see the strategy presented to the Government, at least in outline, by mid-2011. That way, it can become an issue in the general election too.