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Message to Wellington from Taranaki's civic leaders

Looking to the upcoming election on 23 September 2017, it is important to remember that local and central government are partners in delivering services and public leadership to our communities.

At the same time three years ago, the four local authorities in Taranaki, the New Plymouth, Stratford and South Taranaki district councils and the Taranaki Regional Council, came together to issue a clear statement of key areas, that from a local government perspective, are important for both the region and the nation. Significant progress has been made on the nine priorities that we identified as important at the time but there is still work to do on some and there have been new areas that have emerged in the last few years.

Central government policies and priorities have a huge impact on regional communities and economies. When Wellington gets it right, it's easier for our communities to flourish. When Wellington gets it wrong, we're forced to divert our efforts into overcoming frustratingly unnecessary barriers.

The Government delivered on many of the priorities for action we identified three years ago, most notably making a sizeable investment to improve SH3 north.

However, we must continue to work together to address the region's priorities and this is why, as the region's civic leaders, we've updated the list and identified a further six urgent priorities for attention by the incoming Government.

While Taranaki's economy is sound – and retains the highest regional GDP per capita in the country – global variations in prices for our agricultural products and a slowing down in the oil and gas industry has highlighted the need for greater diversity in the regional economy. More recent interest in the region from tourists driven in part by global travel guide publisher, Lonely Planet's ranking of Taranaki as the second-best region in the world to visit, has pointed to the need to do more to plan for and accommodate these visitors. This is a challenge and an opportunity for Taranaki to get it right but it will require a coordinated response from all parties to make it work.

Continued central Government involvement in promoting regional development is crucial to achieving success. The Taranaki region has one of the lowest central government spends per capita despite making a significant contribution to national wealth through its highly

productive agricultural sector and the oil and gas industry and the associated downstream processing and manufacturing industries they support. This is why we have taken this step to remind central government of the importance of provincial regions such as Taranaki. We have excellent amenities and lifestyles but more can and must be done to ensure the region achieves its full potential.

A host of Government policies and programmes in health, education, law and order among others are important to the people of Taranaki, but as local government leaders we have identified six key areas that from a local government perspective, we think are important for both the region and the nation. We are calling on central Government to have these issues at the forefront of their thinking over the next three years and beyond.

Priorities for Taranaki

Taranaki Crossing

Local government in Taranaki is proposing major investment in an additional iconic Taranaki visitor experience – the ‘Taranaki Crossing’. This will be a mountains to surf experience extending from the North Egmont Visitors’ Centre in Egmont National Park to the seaside town of Oakura, via Pukeiti Gardens, with a shorter option ending at Mangorei Road, via the Pouakai Hut. Substantial local funding has been committed to support the concept and further funding is proposed, but the Government needs to step-up and commit long overdue expenditure within the National Park to meet visitor demands and take pressure off other resources such as the Tongariro Crossing. While central Government has recently announced increased funding for track improvement to the Taranaki Crossing, major new investment is required from the Government in track upgrades and improvements to huts and visitor facilities and amenities across the route within the Egmont National Park boundaries, if the Taranaki Crossing is to become a truly world-class asset. It is possible that the Taranaki Crossing could become one of New Zealand’s Great Walks. With appropriate marketing, it will be the single biggest boost to the regional economy in decades and one that will be sustainable into the future.

State Highway 43

The sealing of the final 12 kilometers of the ‘Forgotten World Highway’ is long overdue. With completion of the sealing of this state highway and related improvements works to ensure the highway is safe for the additional traffic once sealed, a major obstacle to attracting visitors travelling down the central North Island will be overcome. It will encourage visitors to use the Tongariro Crossing day walk and the Taranaki Crossing walks. State Highway 43 links these two walks and provides interesting tourism related locations and activities along the route. Completion of the sealing of State Highway 43 will provide benefits to local communities along the route, such as Whangamomona and open up Taranaki to the central North Island.

Completion of the sealing work will also increase state highway resilience within Taranaki and greatly improve safety for users of the highway. The sealing needs to be done and done in one go. A staged approach that would see the job completed over a number of years is not

the answer. Until the road is fully sealed, the road safety and resilience issues will simply not be properly addressed and the economic benefits not be realised.

A recent report commissioned by the Taranaki Regional Council has confirmed the economic, tourism and strategic benefits of completing the sealing of the highway.

Predator-free Taranaki

A funding boost to deliver on the Government's promise to make New Zealand predator-free by 2050 could get a significant kick-start here in Taranaki. We already have Project Mouna, a joint public and private sector initiative to reduce pest populations and reintroduce native species to Egmont National Park, up and running. A predator-free Taranaki will complement other initiatives being undertaken by local councils in conjunction with other Taranaki-based organisations, agencies and Trusts to boost biodiversity and make Taranaki a world leader in biodiversity protection and enhancement and species recovery.

Connections to Mt Taranaki

Mt Taranaki together with Egmont National Park is the primary visitor asset in Taranaki. Yet the connections to the Park are suffering from under investment. Uncertainty about who is to take financial responsibility for roading operations and maintenance within the Park is not helping. North Egmont, Stratford and Dawson Falls roadends are currently 100% funded by the Crown through the New Zealand Transport Agency but this has been under review for some time with no final decisions made. At the same time, increasing pressures are being felt with expanding tourism numbers causing parking and other transport problems. A sustainable, long-term funding solution needs to be found so that the increasing demands being placed on the region's premier visitor attraction can be met. This should include the Mangorei Road and Carrington Road access routes to Pukeiti and Egmont National Park, as these are also important and well-used.

Regional connectivity – the second Rural Broadband Initiative and the new Mobile Black Spot Fund

In October 2016, Crown Fibre Holdings (CFH), on behalf of the Government, announced the release of \$150 million to extend the Rural Broadband Initiative into a second phase and to further extend the Mobile Black Spot Fund. The second Rural Broadband Initiative (RBI2) aims to improve broadband services to rural areas. The initiative will improve connectivity for rural residents and rural-based industries and will benefit tourism and agriculture. The extension to the Mobile Black Spot Fund is aimed at filling the gaps in existing mobile phone coverage at key tourist sites and along state highways.

Improving access to communications technologies also has wider benefits – it encourages people to stay in their local areas, grow business and lift economic growth and productivity, as well as promoting greater social inclusiveness and a sense of local identity.

The Taranaki councils have taken the opportunity presented by CFH to be involved and have offered co-funding and assistance with planning and the roll-out process to gain additional benefits for Taranaki.

The Taranaki councils fully support the Government's initiative to introduce ultra-fast broadband to the larger towns and cities throughout New Zealand but there has been little progress in rural Taranaki with RBI2 and there has been no progress with filling the gaps in our mobile phone coverage.

The lack of progress with these two initiatives is holding Taranaki back.

Taranaki is one of New Zealand's pre-eminent and most highly productive dairying regions. It needs and deserves high speed digital connectivity to grow its rural businesses, lift economic growth and foster closer communities. We suggest Taranaki becomes a pilot region to show what can be done by saturating the province with high speed, high quality data services to support its rural businesses and communities. Our councils are very supportive of such a move and would welcome Government support for it.

As an alternative, we call on the Government to finish the job it started and increase its funding for under-served broadband areas and the mobile black spot fund so that all New Zealanders can benefit from modern-day communications technology.

Freedom camping

The freedom camping phenomenon in Taranaki has been driven by a rapid increase in visitor numbers to Taranaki, particularly of independent travellers. This has created problems for local councils in ensuring visitors can get to attractions safely and that they enjoy suitable amenities once they arrive. State Highway 45 around coastal Taranaki has become particularly popular with freedom campers. The councils believe that road safety works require a Crown funding increase to reflect rapidly expanding tourist numbers. Also important is the need to invest in adequate infrastructure such as toilet, showering and parking facilities at popular freedom camping destinations. Councils do not have adequate resources to cater for rapidly expanding tourist numbers and are looking to central Government to extend its Tourist Infrastructure Fund to accommodate the extra demands being placed on local councils.

The Freedom Camping legislation also needs to be tidied up. This is creating problems for councils in implementation. The Government needs to get the law right so that it can assist local government to achieve a positive outcome for both visitors and residents

Oil and gas industry and returns to the community

We raised this issue three years ago but no action has been forthcoming from the Government to date.

The oil and gas industry produces significant tax and royalty revenues for the Government but none is specifically captured in the region that produces the wealth. The next Government must look to ensure that a portion of the public takings from the oil and gas

industry which currently go into central government coffers, remains or is returned to the region. This will ensure that there is direct benefit to local communities which bear the additional infrastructure and other costs of industry presence in their area.

Western Blue Highway

In 2010 The New Zealand Transport Agency commissioned an investigation into the feasibility and viability of the Western Blue highway proposal – a roll-on-roll-off (RORO) sea link from New Plymouth to Nelson and then on to Christchurch via the Lewis Pass. The investigations confirmed a New Plymouth to Nelson RORO shuttle service was both feasible and financially viable but commercial interests have yet to take up the idea.

The world has now changed since the Kaikoura and Wellington earthquakes which has exposed the fragility of the national transportation network based on freight movements to and from Auckland to the Port of Wellington and then on to Picton, Kaikoura and Christchurch. Furthermore, drivers would be able complete an Auckland to New Plymouth round trip without the compulsory rest breaks needed for Auckland to Wellington, (albeit, with a longer sea trip). The Western Blue Highway would provide options and add ‘resilience’ to the national transportation network.

One of the main issues looked into as part of the feasibility study was the extension of the state highway in New Plymouth to include funding for the construction of a RORO facility at Port Taranaki (the key missing infrastructure link). Nelson already has a RORO facility.

Further work was subsequently done to expand on the north-south alternative blue highway to also look east-west with New Plymouth’s natural advantages of a deep water port with close proximity to the eastern seaboard of Australia and from there to markets in Asia.

The Taranaki councils are calling on the Government to revisit the Western Blue Highway proposal, particularly in light of the changed circumstances since the Kaikoura earthquakes and the need to now add resilience to the transport network. The value proposition is clear from the earlier work and would provide benefits nationally as well as to the region.

Report card

So what has been achieved in the nine key priorities for Taranaki identified three years ago?

Here is a quick summary:

What we asked for	What has happened	Comment
<p>State Highway 3 north A commitment is required to significant and major improvements to this strategically important highway.</p>	<p>The Government has committed up to \$135 million from the Accelerated Regional Rooding Programme for major improvement works in the Awakino Gorge to Mt Messenger area, including plans to bypass Mt Messenger and the Awakino tunnel and undertake other safety improvement works along the route. Construction is to start in late 2018/19.</p>	<p>A great result.</p>
<p>Normanby overbridge realignment Money must be found to finally get this important road safety and improvement project completed.</p>	<p>The Government committed \$17.6 million from the Accelerated Regional Rooding Programme to complete the Normanby overbridge realignment project which has now been completed and was officially opened in February 2017.</p>	<p>A great result.</p>
<p>Road funding for heartland regions A mechanism to replace regional funding (R fund) allocations which end in April 2015 is needed to ensure productive regions like Taranaki continue to receive a fair share of road funding.</p>	<p>The Government has put in place a Regional Improvements Activity Class to replace the previous R funds allocations. Proposed funding in the GPS on Land Transport 2018 has an upper range of \$140 million on this contestable fund.</p>	<p>A good result.</p>
<p>Oil and gas industry and returns to the community The next Government must ensure that a portion of the public takings from the oil and gas industry remains in the region to ensure there are direct benefits to local communities.</p>	<p>The Government has not taken any direct action to address this issue.</p>	<p>No response to date.</p>
<p>A fresh focus on regional development and tourism Taranaki wants to see a renewed and tangible commitment to supporting regional development – recognition that regions like Taranaki are the major engine rooms of the national economy yet huge amounts of public funds are going into the major centres.</p>	<p>A review of Taranaki’s regional economic development strategy is now well underway with support being received from central government through the regional economic development programme of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.</p>	<p>A promising development.</p>
<p>Treaty settlements Settling historical Treaty of Waitangi claims will have considerable benefits for Maori and the region as a whole. The next Government must continue to make the completion of Treaty settlements in Taranaki a priority.</p>	<p>Good progress has been made on Treaty settlements with all bar one (of eight) iwi having now settled their Treaty claims. The remaining iwi (Ngati Maru) are currently in negotiations with the Crown. Claims relating to the Mounga are under negotiation. A reconciliation between the Crown and Parihaka has recently been completed (9 June 2017) and a relationship agreement entered into between the Crown, local authorities and Parihaka.</p>	<p>An excellent outcome for Taranaki.</p>
<p>RMA implementation and reforms The next Government must continue with reforms to improve outcomes and reduce compliance costs for councils, communities and resource users, but this must be done carefully to ensure that real problems are defined and that local communities retain the ability to make decisions that affect them.</p>	<p>Major amendments to the RMA were made in April 2017. Whether these changes will reduce compliance costs for local councils and retain the ability to make local decisions, remain to be seen. The councils were critical of a number of the changes in the Bill.</p>	<p>Further work needed.</p>

<p>Marine oil spill response The next Government must take a lead to develop a collaborative central and local government and commercial sector response to building a marine oil spill response capability in Taranaki that is fit for purpose.</p>	<p>The Government undertook a review of the New Zealand Oil Spill Response Strategy in 2015. The Government has responded positively to local concerns regarding the high risks of an oil spill in Taranaki, but has not committed to establishing a dedicated national oil spill response capability in Taranaki.</p>	<p>No response on the major issue of concern.</p>
<p>Investment in Egmont National Park Much greater Crown investment is needed in this iconic national asset to produce wide-ranging benefits for the region and the country.</p>	<p>Project Mouna has seen a major funding boost for predator control and species recovery but investment in visitor facilities lags behind what is needed to make a significant difference to Taranaki. Much greater levels of funding are required from the Crown to boost visitor numbers and ensure this premier asset in New Zealand's national park system works as well as it could for the region and the nation.</p>	<p>Investment in project Mouna has been good news for Taranaki but there has a less than adequate response in relation to much needed and overdue investment in visitor facilities.</p>