

Truck hijack of a different kind

Lest anyone working at the NZ Transport Agency thinks I'm unfairly picking on their fine organisation, let me start with praise for a sterling effort to keep the highway north out of Taranaki in a drivable condition.

Early this year, I wrote of 1000-plus bumps on the stretch south between Te Kuiti and New Plymouth and what a nightmare they created for a small car with low-profile tyres. Well, our last excursion a couple of weeks ago found far fewer bone-judders. In fact, there was only one memorable one, on the ridge just south of Body's Hill.

So, miracle work NZTA – especially considering the main topic of this followup column. Trucks.

Picture this: it's a wet day and you're heading north for the traffic jams of Auckland and you're caught behind a behemoth with 42 wheels, not enough mudguards, and its own climate, which trails behind as a cloud of greasy moisture that settles on your windscreen and refuses to come off no matter how many litres of water you pump out of your window washer.

But there may be relief. You're coming to a rare passing lane. Some joker has already acknowledged your frustration by putting up a sign saying the lane is six kilometres away (surely the earliest such warning in the country).

At the lane, however, there is the ultimate frustration. The behemoth wearing the "H" sign sees you coming and before you can pass it, has pulled out to pass another behemoth in front of it, one that it's capable of passing because it can go one kilometre an hour faster.

The passing lane is blocked as they race aide by side. The passing lane has now gone. You continue in a new climate. Until you come to a place where it's probably not safe to pass, but you do, possibly exceeding the speed limit by 10s to do it and maybe even frightening a bunch of motorists coming the other way, although they probably won't notice because their vision is blocked by their own greasy climates.

What I've just described will be familiar if you're an ordinary motorist intent on getting to and from Te Kuiti and beyond. So you'll understand why I contacted NZTA in the wake of the Mt Messenger-Awakino Tunnel announcement and asked what for us is a far more important question: what else?

In effect, they're going to spend \$200 million on fixing two prominent SH3 North obstacles that occupy about 10 minutes of a two-hour drive. Mostly, it seems for the benefit of the trucking industry.

Don't get me wrong, Tom. I don't hate truckies. I've known a lot of good ones, brave ones even, like Bruce (name changed to protect privacy), who found the Mt Messenger tunnel blocked on a trip south in his freighter to deliver stuff to my father's business in the 70s, so edged his massive vehicle along the track that goes around the outside of the tunnel. We acclaimed him a hero in a Taranaki Herald story.

My point is that the road improvement plan has been hijacked. A more sensible approach had already been put together by Roger Maxwell and his regional transport committee, one that proposed ways (at a third of the cost) that would have provided more passing lanes and an overall safer road, rather than blow most of it on a couple of problems.

Problems for the trucking industry, that is. They're not much more than scenic features to the rest of us.

I asked the RTA if more passing lanes are planned. They said yes – two. There will be a new northbound one on the Ladies Mile straight just before the southern end of the Awakino Gorge, and a southbound one on a straight just north of Tongaporutu. Oh, and some slow vehicle bays in the Gorge. Pardon? Don't they use those on steep hills, which are the only things that slow big trucks. And isn't the Gorge all flat?

The New Plymouth to Te Kuiti trip is passing lane-lite. It has one about every 20-25km (and 35km stretches with none), compared with one every 7-8km on SH3 between New Plymouth and Hawera.

JT column for Sat Sept 8 2017 - trucks

As polling day draws close, here's a thought for candidates: if the country can afford \$10 billion for new roads around the rest of the country, how about sparing us a few mill more to do the SH3 North job properly.

Incidentally, Bruce confided once that he never looked in his rearview mirror.