

Botched Messenger briefing had gold content

One certainty emerged from the New Plymouth update on how they might fix Mt Messenger - you wouldn't want the briefing organisers to be building the new road.

The session was hopeless. The room was too small and the wrong shape, the presenters had no microphones, the show screening was blocked by people standing in front of the projector, questions asked by the knowledgeable audience were inaudible.

Road Transport Agency bureaucrats seem to have no idea how interested Taranaki people are about what's to be done with the route north. The room was packed with truckies, ex-truckies, local government people (and ex-local government people), and ordinary old motorists like me who've spent a lifetime staying alive on that damn road.

It was a missed opportunity for the agency - which was a shame, because what the road designers had to tell us was impressive.

I was sceptical when I arrived, because the words "public consultation" are much-abused. It's usually a cynical process: those in the public service thank us for our input then inform us in technical jargon what's going to happen, without too many statistical details on what our feedback actually said.

We didn't get details this time, either, just broad reference to what we already suspected from letters to the editor of this newspaper - that we, the driving public and the trucking industry, wanted what was called Option 3, the route redirecting the highway to the west and well clear of Mt Messenger. All they told us was yes, that was the preferred option in feedback to date.

It was a good start to an otherwise botched briefing. Suddenly we're thinking, could this be real consultation after all? But then, in the inimical way of bureaucracy, things got complicated: they changed the numbering system. Suddenly we're getting letters to define the options. And suddenly (although it probably doesn't seem that way to the TPA people who've been working on this for months) we are seeing five options instead of three. The change was almost obscured by the high-level language that cloaks everything governments say.

Things got slightly better as the briefing proceeded. People were asked to sit down in front, the initial presenter with the soft voice was replaced with someone with a louder one, they started again...and what unfolded was enlightening. Marvellously so.

They used a three-dimensional data show that could be swung this way and that, so one minute we were getting a hawk-eye view of Mt Messenger from the south, then from the east, then the west; the next a kokako-eye perspective from near ground level so we would see the heights of hills and ridges and the extent of bridges and cuttings and tunnels.

The five options offer alternative routes to the west (Option A - the old Option 3); to the west but closer to Mt Messenger (Options B1 and B2 - was Option 2); over the existing road (Option D - was Option 1); and a new route (Option C) that would run around the eastern side of Mt Messenger and follow a neighbouring valley back to the highway further north.

All have tunnels, ranging in length from about 200 metres to 240 metres, and some have bridges up to 80 metres high and 600 metres long. A combination of cutting, bridge and tunnel on Option A, for example, is partly the result of a rethink motivated by the need to remove major obstacles from the wide-ranging, largely ground-dwelling kokako birds that are being re-established on the DOC and Ngati Tama reserves there.

The DOC kokako reintroduction programme follows 30 years of rat and possum eradication in the area and decades of breeding up bird numbers on Hauraki Gulf islands like Little Barrier and Tiritiri Matangi. By the 1980s, kokako in Taranaki had dropped to single figures, so this attempt to bring them back from pending extinction is much more than an environmental whim.

While Option C may attract the truckies with its lower gradient (six percent as opposed to 10 or so for the others), and it is further away from the kokako area, I'm picking Option A. TPA's briefers gave

the impression that ridge lines in that area have tramping tracks, and the coastal White Cliffs walkway isn't that far away. Taranaki needs to develop more tourism attractions. This might be a chance to build a parking area off the new highway and create a visitor centre using buildings left over from the project. Win-win all round.