

Messenger isn't the full message

Harry, I'm not with you on the Mt Messenger bypass. I think it's an extravagant misdirection of \$200 million in tax dollars.

You say it will help remedy a hazard that feeds the road toll. Will it? Where are the accident and road toll statistics in your dissertation to support that?

I can't claim your extensive political experience on this, but over my lifetime I've traversed that bit of road many hundreds of times, too.

My argument: Mt Messenger is a known quantity. When you arrive at its approaches, you go into a different driving mode because you know what you're going to get – a bunch of tight, steep but well-shaped corners with strong barriers on their outsides. Even tourists can see that.

It means paying even more attention than the remainder of that journey demands, because there could be a bloody great truck coming around the next blind bend. But that special hyper state isn't required for long. You're over the hill in a few minutes.

The trucking industry has been pushing hardest for the bypass, on safety grounds, to save fuel and tyres, and because the mountain's tunnel is tight for their behemoths.

They have a strong case. Messenger helps make SH3 much more expensive for truckies than other highways, and they claim being able to use bigger trucks will reduce their numbers. They also campaigned for the other big project that will go ahead, bypassing the Awakino Tunnel.

But Messenger and the Awakino Tunnel are hardly the only major hazards on that journey. They're just two of many problems Taranaki officials and local body politicians have pinpointed over the last half century.

Although the NZ Transport Agency has inexplicably narrowed its focus to just 53km of SH3 "through Mt Messenger and the Awakino Gorge", various Taranaki Regional Council-hosted SH3 groups have worked on a broader canvas, in fact the full 140km journey from New Plymouth to Piopio.

Their 2014 strategy – with an estimated total cost of \$45 million – identified 44 possibilities for making the route safer. While it acknowledged Mt Messenger as the biggie, the strategy report reckoned most of the hill's problems could be resolved for less than \$5 million. It considered Awakino Tunnel too expensive to sort.

Many of its fixes were passing lanes, of which there are few between Taranaki and Te Kuiti, a deficiency that seems to aggravate impatient driving and risk-taking even more than the lanes themselves.

The 2014 suggestions included:

- A \$9 million deviation south of the Mangamaio Bridge to take out a tight corner at the end of the straights north of Mimi School.
- Spending \$7.4 million to fix tight corners south of the Kuriwera Bridge (small stream in the Awakino Gorge).
- Easing corners in the stretch leading south to the passing lane north of the Awakino Tunnel, including adding a passing lane (cost: about \$5 million).

- Devoting \$9 million to realigning the twisting piece of road near Bexley Station, south of the Awakino Tunnel, including putting in twin bridges.
- A passing lane (\$800,000) on the Ladies Mile Straight north of the twin bridges over the Awakino River. The bridges shortened what was a long straight for passing.
- Passing lanes at Mohakatino on the coast south of Mōkau (\$500,000).
- A southbound passing lane on the Okoki Straight north of Urenui (\$500,000).
- Improving sight lines at the corner on Mōkau Heads (\$400,000).
- A passing lane on the straight north of Mimi School (\$700,000).
- Easing the curve at the southern end of the Awakino Tunnel area passing lane (\$350,000).

Another 27 projects - improving corners, fixing bridge approaches, improving pavement strength, earthworks, retaining walls, putting in slow-traffic passing bays, and smoothing bumps - would each have cost less than \$300,000 (that also applies to five of the seven on Mt Messenger), so would have been classed as minor improvements or maintenance by the NZTA playbook.

I'm not sure what NZTA thought of that list, although it seems obvious passing lanes are out of favour (with arguably good reason, given how some motorists abuse them).

The agency's PR machine now mentions a 2017-2019 programme to remove "sharp bends and roadside hazards"; do road widening; improve rest stop and pull-over areas, slow-vehicle bays and (existing) passing lanes; install side barriers; and something called "slope stability improvements". Details like locations and individual cost breakdowns aren't given.

Much Taranaki local knowledge has been ignored to allow Mt Messenger and the Awakino Tunnel to commandeer the show, at four times the expense.