

Renewed vigour in ideas to tackle SH38 seal issue

WITH State Highway 38 being identified as one of new council chief executive Fergus Power's top priorities, district councillors last week discussed the current state of the highway and plans to get it sealed.

After speaking to an NZTA highways manager, councillor Chris Joblin said there appeared to be some support for the road being sealed.

He noted that NZTA was currently embarking on its One Network Road Classification, which aims to classify roads into categories based on their function within the national network.

Mr Joblin said under the proposed classification, State Highway 38 would be bundled with State Highway 35.

But with a different classification, the road would not be required to be sealed to full State Highway specifications.

"If it could be done for a figure under \$5m, it could certainly be back on the table," Mr Joblin said.

Council engineering manager Jamie Cox said State Highway 38 would not have more than 1000 vehicles a day, so it would fit in the lower category.

Mr Cox said one of the impediments to NZTA sealing State Highway 38 was the standard required to upgrade to prior to sealing.

Currently, he said, it would cost \$10m just to seal to Tuai — or roughly a million a kilometre.

Council was sealing to a good condition for under \$300,000 a kilometre — about a third of the State Highway standard.

Mr Cox said a key plank in the council's economic strategy was 'Te Urewera Rainforest Route' comprising State Highway 38 administered by NZTA, Special Purpose Road 38 administered by the district council and the section of road sometimes called Ruatahuna Road under the Whakatane District Council.

The existing strategy involved establishing an inter-regional group to try to open Te Urewera Rainforest Route all the way through.

"We could actually leverage off the Rotorua tourism, Whakatane District Council wanting to enhance their area and Tuhoe having a greater presence," Mr Cox said.

Council needed to discuss whether it continued with that philosophy or change tack and just work to open it from the Wairoa end to Waikaremoana.

Mayor Craig Little said he had received phone calls from people who could not understand why there was tarseal up to Aniwanuiwa, but this was a special purpose road under council control.

"The State Highway is not our road and that's why

people get confused. It's NZTA that's letting us down by not doing what we want them to do."

Mr Cox said there was 10,000 kilometres of State Highway roading. Of that 10,000, approximately 30km was unsealed, 27km of which were on State Highway 38.

"Are we concerned about opening a tourism route through to Rotorua which could benefit both parties but seems to be getting us nowhere — or are we more concerned with trying to do something from the Wairoa end, which would benefit Wairoa," Mr Joblin asked.

Chief executive Fergus Power said it sounded like he and the Mayor needed to go to Wellington, get the key decision-makers in one room, preferably with Wairoa's MP as well.

He said it was interesting to hear the proportion of unsealed State Highways and sounded like the Wairoa district had been forgotten. "Which is entirely inappropriate given that Te Urewera is a national treasure and a huge tourism magnet. To have it locked away behind an un-traversable metal road that nobody can drive on makes no sense."

Deputy Mayor Denise Eaglesome-Karekare said she had sat around the council table for years discussing State Highway 38.

"When does it go from strategy to actual action plan? What this council needs to see is some options put in front of it with costs, with opportunities, with things that aren't going to happen."

Mr Cox said NZTA had their own policy drivers as well and while it might feel like nothing had happened, council had committed to an inter-regional group.

Mr Joblin suggested pushing for sealing through to Onepoto, because council's first obligation was to its ratepayers.

"I don't see why we can't have two strategies running side by side."

Councillor Benita Cairns said whether it was Wairoa to Tuai or Onepoto, council on its own did not have the teeth to shift NZTA, so mobilising the community to get behind the sealing of State Highway 38 to Onepoto had to be one of the strategies.

"The other thing from the tourism perspective, is that people are not coming through the Urewera to come to Wairoa. The only reason why they come to Wairoa then head up to Taupo is they don't want to do that road again.

"So if we're looking at a tourism strategy, we need to be boosting that whole loop — Taupo, Napier and Wairoa."