

Tamahere-Woodlands Councillors' update April 2023: Telephone Rd closure, Council budgets and natural burials!

A final decision on the future of the SH1B Telephone Rd rail crossing has been put off for another year, but its ongoing closure is deeply disappointing for the community including your local Waikato District Councillors Mike Keir and I (Crystal Beavis).

In a report published on its website, Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency says the low-cost solutions offered by the community for re-opening the crossing do not address all the safety requirements, and that it does not have the funding available for a safe solution in its current funding cycle (the 2021-24 National Land Transport Programme). See the report here:

<https://nzta.govt.nz/projects/sh1b-telephone-road-rail-crossing>

Rail crossing options priced at \$8-11 million

The agency has priced the options for safely re-opening the crossing at between \$8m and \$11m to improve the approach slope to the railway and to allow 30m for 'stacking' waiting traffic. It will put one of these options forward for funding in its 2024-27 programme, although it can't guarantee that funding will be approved.

Meantime, Waka Kotahi plans to build a pedestrian/cycling crossing over the railway line, with a school bus stop on the Holland Rd side, subject to approval from KiwiRail.

Now that the Waikato Expressway has been built, SH1B is on a not-yet-determined timetable to be returned to Waikato District Council as a local road. However, in the personal opinions of your local councillors – unless the crossing can be re-opened, Waka Kotahi will not be returning the road at the level of amenity it once offered. We will continue to argue in favour of re-opening the crossing as a moral obligation to this community.

Annual Plan changes coming

At the time of writing, your Council is re-examining its capital and operating budgets for the year ahead and expects to issue a proposed, revised Annual Plan for 2023-24 with a real likelihood that rates will rise higher than the 3.5% rise anticipated back in 2021.

Economic conditions have changed since the Council adopted its last 'Long Term Plan' covering the year ahead. We now face an inflation rate of 7.2%, rising interest rates, higher than expected depreciation costs on our assets, and now, also, high costs of disaster recovery.

Early estimates indicate the cost of the damage wrought by recent weather events including Cyclone Gabrielle on roading infrastructure in our District could be at least \$8m, and likely more, and will require changes to work programmes in both the current financial year and the next (2023-24). While your Council has a disaster recovery fund and natural disaster insurance in place, the magnitude of these costs may still represent a challenge for a District with just 33,000 rateable properties.

Some changes being considered for the proposed Annual Plan are likely to be subject to consultation this coming month (April), so please take the opportunity to have your say if this involves you.

A likely proposal for the community in the former Tamahere Ward to consider this year is a targeted rate to support the work of the Tamahere Mangaone Restoration Trust. The Trust was first established in 2013 to restore the native habitat in the Tamahere Reserve and it has since expanded its focus to include the Mangaharakeke Stream gully system in Tamahere. The targeted rate proposal has been put forward to Council, with the support of the Tamahere Community Committee, to enable the Trust to undertake habitat restoration work on Council reserve and publicly accessible land in the Tamahere Gully area. This work would be supported with an MOU with the Council and would enable the Tamahere walkway project to progress faster and at a reduced cost, providing an increased level of service above what Council would normally provide.

Cemeteries Bylaw consultation open

Allowing natural burials and dogs on leads in cemeteries, and removing the provision that prohibits whaanau from filling in graves themselves, are three of the key changes being proposed by the Council as it reviews its Cemeteries Bylaw.

The proposed changes are intended to make cemeteries inclusive spaces and to reflect the practices and beliefs of our community.

Natural burials, also known as 'eco-burials', occur when a body is prepared and buried in ways that do not slow the decomposition process, and often use eco-friendly options like flax, cardboard, untreated timber or cloth in place of a traditional casket.

Consultation on the proposed Cemeteries Bylaw 2023 is now open until 5pm, Sunday 16 April 2023, and submissions can be lodged on the Council website or by filling in the form at any Council location.

Contact your Tamahere-Woodlands Councillors:

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