
MEDIA RELEASE

03 February 2010

Feasibility supports strong economic benefits

The proposed 85.6-kilometre coast-to-coast cycle track from Horeke to the Bay of Islands could return in excess of \$25 to \$28 million to the local economy in the first five years of operation.

At the same time the project could generate up to 80 jobs in the construction phase and close to 100 full time positions over five years once the project is fully operational.

These were among critical findings in the feasibility study and business plan lodged with the office of the Minister of Tourism in December.

A decision on government funding for the project from the national cycleway programme announced last year is expected to be known within the next eight weeks.

Western Community Board chair and cycleway advocate Tracy Dalton said today an early funding decision was critical if the project was to be fully operational by the target date of August 2011 –to help capture a Far North share of the tourist impetus from the Rugby World Cup.

"There is far more than track construction involved. Service providers such as accommodation, food and beverage, hire companies and a range of ancillary services need to know when the track will be available so they can get their planning underway.

"Another finding from the study was that to maximize the returns to the local economy and generate employment opportunities, it is going to be critical that the project proceeds as a single entity. It can still be staged but the returns will not be fully realized until the full 86-kilometre link is operational," she said.

While the Far North District Council was providing the initial framework for the project, the intention was that it would be community driven through a charitable trust and governance group to maintain the groundswell of enthusiasm and impetus already generated.

"The coast-to-coast concept, based in the existing rail corridor between Okaihau, Kaikohe and Kawakawa, has captured the imagination of local people from all backgrounds and there is a real enthusiasm to get on with the construction.

"There is already a commitment from stakeholders, including a number of landowners, iwi and local trusts, to make a voluntary start on clearing the corridor to be ready for the construction phase, and the Western Community Board is prepared to take a deputation to Wellington to press our case for funding," Tracy said.

She said new job and business opportunities were coming to light almost weekly, such was the support which had been generated.

"This is the largest single investment the government has made in the mid-North area in decades and potentially is the stimulus to the economy that has been previously lacking."

It would be a catalyst for commercial operations and development beyond the Horeke-Opua trail, including the potential for boat and waka excursions and maritime related tours and facilities on the wider Hokianga Harbour.

The central link for the trail was the rail corridor between Kawakawa and Okaihau. It was envisaged the Bay Of Islands Vintage Railway corridor between Kawakawa and Opua would provide the eastern seaboard link, with the western link following the Utakura Valley across private land to the Hokianga Harbour at Horeke.

Discussions with landowners including On Track and local farmers were ongoing, and lines of communication had been established with private and public sector funding agencies. There would be ongoing consultation with local communities as the project moved into the final planning and construction phases.

At an operational level, the feasibility study concluded the project could be self sustaining and in fact showing an annual surplus by 2016.

Tracy said the feasibility analysis had confirmed the economic and labour-generating potential of the project which the working party had first envisaged and she was confident a very good case had been made for full government funding support.

"It's now in the hands of the Minister," she said.

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