

Rt. Hon Dr Michael Cullen etc etc honoured guests

Today's event represents another major step forward for the Auckland rail project.

It was four years ago almost to the day that the Prime Minister RT Hon Helen Clark turned the first sod when the Auckland Regional Council began double tracking the western line at Boston Road Mt Eden. In 2006 the project was taken up by Ontrack as part of that agencies role in the historic renaissance of the whole New Zealand rail network.

When we began this project, no-one at the time fully appreciated just what a major technical challenge this would be - and probably just as well too. Without doubt the greatest technical challenge of them all was presented by New Lynn - and it is very much to the government's credit that it quickly realized that this challenge could only be overcome with major engineering works - to essentially grade separate the rail lines from the busy streets which intersected it. Though the work that begins here today has many beneficial aspects for town planning - in effect the New Lynn interchange is a mother of all grade separation projects.

New Lynn undergrounding will also enable best practice urban design & the integration of land use & transport.

It also demonstrates that adaptive management - adapting already laid plans to confront and overcome unforeseen technical challenges & to capitalize on opportunities, is an essential part of major projects of this scale and significance.

Like the other agencies involved, the ARC has become very much aware of the grave potential problem presented by level crossings - as in essence rail rapid transit is retro-fitted through the densely populated suburbs of Auckland.

There are I understand, 31 level crossings within the Auckland commuter rail network - between Swanson and Pukekohe - and 17 on the Western Line. To us level crossings and grade separations with their clear implications for safety have become a question of the highest priority. The Auckland Regional Council therefore has resolved this year to make \$21m available as seed funding to assist city and district councils in ensuring that level crossings are ready for high frequency, high speed electric trains. This we believe may also require closing off some smaller suburban streets where they intersect the rail line. Here I want to acknowledge Chris Cairns and Toll NZ for putting the spotlight on what is a national problem.

Ladies and gentlemen It is a great privilege to be in public service at a time in which rail is undergoing such an historic renaissance.

It is also useful to recall that this is the centennial year of the completion of the North Island main trunk line. The challenges we face today though unquestionably technically difficult, and hugely expensive pale into insignificance compared to what our ancestors achieved 100 years ago building the NIMT through 100s of kilometres of some of the most rugged country in the world.

We need to recall the example of that truly inspiring generation of New Zealanders whose labour & ingenuity transformed New Zealand from a series of colonial settlements into a modern nation. Already we in Auckland with our colleagues are looking ahead from Project Dart, the double tracking of the western line and the major reconfiguration of Newmarket junction, to the exciting prospect of electrification of the Auckland rail network, the construction of the inner city rail loop, and the extension of rail to Auckland International airport.

Traffic congestion still remains a major problem in Auckland but it is at long last being tackled thanks to the efforts of this government - and the region.

Up until the mid-1950s Aucklanders were amongst the more diligent of public transport users - as good as any in the world with just over 100 million trips per annum - in a population of less than half a million. But due to incredibly short-sighted decisions made by local and central government at that time and a deliberate reluctance by successive governments - with the exception of the present government - to invest in transport infrastructure - Auckland's public transport usage declined disastrously. Now thankfully in terms of public transport we are on our way back. The ARC Group – ARC, ARH in support of the Auckland Regional Transport Authority will be playing our part.

This year in our 2008/09 budget the ARC will be spending just under quarter of a billion dollars on public transport.

\$120 million on capex and \$102 million on opex

That is not counting the money we will make available for level crossings.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no good reason why Auckland could not once again have one of the best public transport systems in the world. Let us view today's event as one more stop along the line to that bright destination.

Thank you