

Waitakere City Seminar

Hosted by Waitakere City Council and Civic Trust, Auckland

Friday, 16 March 2007

One of the first aims of the exercise was to test the efficiency of the local rail system! This was embarked upon with some trepidation, as there had been reports of signal and other rail infrastructure failures during the prior week, leading to some long delays.

Trust president, Munroe Graham, decided to travel early, in order to take some photographs around central Henderson prior to the event. Accordingly he travelled by car, which was found most convenient, taking only about 15 to 20 minutes from the Green Lane roundabout, mostly against the main western city-bound traffic flow. This journey ended at the car park adjoining the historic Falls hotel, where the tariff was a very reasonable three dollars per day. Photos taken at the time can be seen in the "Photo Gallery" section of the website, under art, houses, railway stations, landscapes and commercial buildings.



The first train of the day was due to depart from Newmarket at 8.34 am. It transpired that that train took one and a half hours to reach Henderson.

Four optimistic and hardy members of the party were at the station at Newmarket at 9.11 am for the second train, joining 3 from Britomart and picking up 3 others on the way.

For reasons, which do not immediately come to mind, the rail transit authorities have given themselves the name MAXX, which few Aucklanders recognize.

The MAXX Information desk had assured that the second train would run through to Henderson – but of course it did not! All were offloaded on to a bus at Avondale and after a tortuous ride, arrived at the Henderson station at 10.20 am. (1hr 10mins was therefore taken, for a half hour journey, which a reasonably fit budgie would manage in perhaps 15 minutes, including a drink and comfort stop on the way).



Due to delays with the train, the seminar did not begin until about 10.30. At that time, thankfully, everybody headed for a cup of something hot in the well-appointed Council Chamber, where the Mayor, Bob Harvey and staff of the Strategic Services Department gave a warm welcome. It was particularly appreciated that Bob Harvey had made himself available during a very busy schedule on that particular day.



Councillor Penny Hulse showed us her presentation, which had won first prize in the 'Liveable Community Awards' section at Hanzhou, China in November 2006. She emphasised the Council's leaning towards community democracy and its (statutory) role as steward/guardian of the environment. She expanded on Waitakere City's inclusive governance, which helped stimulate creativity and vitality in the community. The region has 25% of its population less than 24 years of age.

Kyle Balderston outlined the region's growth management strategy, land use planning and transport schemes. Planning had to take into account an increase of 100,000 people (about 50%) in the area by 2020. Project Twin Streams and the Waitakere Ranges Protection Bill are significant works in progress.

Suggestions by participants included staggering starting hours for shops, schools and offices to ease traffic problems; the urgent necessity of planning for industry/employment for the local population; the also urgent necessity for public transport planning, including electrification of the railway (even free transport?), provision for a rail link to Westgate, Hobsonville and Albany and an inquiry regarding landscape character areas in the city.

The seminar schedule provided time from lunch, including time to explore the nearby Central business district. Suggested places to visit in the seminar program had included the new joint Unitec-Waitakere City Library, the re-sited and restored historic Falls Hotel and its associated parkland. (Both these places have restaurants). There were many other food possibilities in the streets and the food hall.

A group including the president and secretary went to see the library and dined in the adjoining café. The library building is interesting for its mix of good and bad architectural and engineering features. Also, it appears to have no provision for containing vertical fire spread between floors, a criticism that also applies to the new City Centre complex.



The seminar schedule was to continue from 1.15 pm with a tour of the Waitakere City Centre building, focusing on sustainability features of its design. This proved to be a fascinating study, well led by a dedicated council officer, with the possible highlight being a small worm farm, alive and well, recycling food debris.



At 1.15 pm there was a mini-bus tour of the ranges and environs. The program had suggested including wetlands, streams, storm water control, ECO housing, transport initiatives, intensification, ranges protection and other significant developments in the region. Indeed, most of these items were covered in a very interesting drive, initially up to the lookout on Scenic Drive, then to Swanson, passing the restored historic station, through Ranui (where there remain many examples of the lean to batch type cottage of the 1950s), via the Summerland primary school, where the local authority has provided joint-venture funds for the development of community facilities, to Glen Eden and its new railway station and back to Henderson, with a brief look at ECO housing on the way.



The seminar schedule provided for a return to Henderson about 3.30 pm.

Meantime, the MAXX schedule had indicated that trains would depart Henderson at 3.53 pm and 4.30 pm. Considering the problems experienced in the morning, only a couple of hardy rail fans chose this form of transport for the return to Auckland. They did manage to get back, but reports in the press the following day indicated that there had been delays of up to one hour.

Altogether, a particularly interesting seminar, showing that Henderson already has the most interesting central business district to be found within the Auckland region. Rail transport is particularly convenient, but at present of Third World quality.

Civic Trust Auckland commends the local authority for its efforts to date and hopes that its plans for the future of the region, particularly in terms of public transport, meet the high standards of recent development work.

M L Graham
27 March 2007