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Smarter traffic solutions are getting Auckland moving again

Are Auckland's roads driving you to distraction? You're not alone. As Auckland grows, so does the number of cars on our roads.

Auckland's growth is phenomenal. One third of New Zealand's population is already located here and is being added to at the rate of a city the size of Christchurch every 10 years. This means that each year brings 30,000 more people, 12,000 more households, 11,000 more jobs and 20,000 more vehicles.

So Auckland's roads, motorways, state highways and local arterials, which are already operating close to capacity, have to cope with 60 more cars every day!

This increasing pressure means more accidents, more roadworks, more delays, and more frustration for people trying to get from A to B.

There's a certain irony in the fact that as the pace of life increases around us, we're being forced to drive slower, and the longer it's taking us to get to where we're going.

And it's not as if we can stop and smell the roses more – we're too busy dodging roadworks and other hazards, and avoiding running into other frustrated motorists. That's the bad news.

The good news is that our councils and government are paying attention to the plight of Auckland travellers and putting significant resources into not only finding solutions but also actually putting them into practice.

More cars = more roads

One of the more obvious solutions to more traffic is building more roads. Lately we've seen new direct links between the Northwestern, Port and Northern motorways, and a new motorway extension through Grafton Gully. And many of us are applauding the completion – after 40 years – of the upgrade of the Central Motorway Junction.

The Northern Busway, completed earlier this year, is a major public transport initiative linking the North Shore to Britomart, with investigations underway to extend the route to Orewa.

Other projects are underway and on track: there's the Western Ring Route connecting South Auckland to Albany, providing a strategic alternative route to State Highway 1 through Central Auckland. But building more roads isn't the only answer, and certainly isn't sustainable in the longer term. Auckland's traffic challenges are complex – and so should the solutions be.

The way of the future

'Active road management' and 'travel demand management' may sound like bureaucratic claptrap, but they're actually internationally recognised best practices that involve using existing infrastructure in better, smarter and more efficient ways.

Using the latest planning and design methods and leading-edge technology, travel demand management (or 'TDM') is regarded by many of the world's top traffic design and management specialists as the way of the future for travel.

It works by putting in place a multi-faceted network designed to support and promote smarter travel, both now and into the future.

With TDM, for example, land use planning and transport planning are better integrated so that the distance between home and the workplace is reduced, thereby shortening journeys and reducing the need for travel.

Opportunities for 'trip chaining' are considered – this means using a single trip for several purposes, such as dropping the children off at school on the way to work, while also making a stop over for shopping.

There are also moves to follow the European and American trends of placing transport 'hubs' within retail complexes – the Sylvia Park retail centre, for example, incorporates a bus station and there are plans for a future rail link.

TDM also focuses on providing better travel choices for people, making non-car-based travel – such as buses, trains, cycling and walking – more attractive and accessible. It means too that planning for any new motorway will automatically include priority for buses.

We have the technology...

It's not all about town planning – technology is playing a leading role in helping manage the motorways and cut down congestion.

For example, Auckland has its recently extended system called 'Comprehensive Motorway Management', which includes 200 cameras and a web-based variable message sign system that delivers live traffic reports to travellers via the radio and the web, showing where congestion is happening and how to avoid it.

Ramp signals are the latest addition to the system. In cities throughout Europe, the States and Australia, ramp signals are increasingly used to make motorway performance more convenient, safe and reliable.

Most useful during peak times, ramp signals can help reduce 'pressure spots', improving motorway speeds and bringing consistency to journey times.

Some 60 ramp signals will be operating throughout the Southern, Northern and Northwestern motorways within the next 18 months. This means pressure points should start to ease along the motorways like the South Eastern Highway northbound on-ramp to the Southern Motorway and the Constellation Drive southbound on-ramp to the Northern Motorway.

Variable message signs at ramp signals and on motorway gantries will increasingly provide up-to-the-minute information including alerting motorists to accidents and road conditions ahead, as well as anticipated travel times.

And although some motorists will no doubt experience initial irritation at these 'new-fangled' devices, it pays to remember they're there to help, not hinder, and that like anything new, it may take some time for us to adjust.

But if we're to pay attention to the evidence coming from overseas – not to mention our own growth trends – then it's clear that if Auckland's future is going to remain bright, we need to start thinking smarter, planning smarter and driving smarter.