

11 May 2020

TTP0201
LMS

Ministry of Transport
PO Box 3175
WELLINGTON 6140

Attn: draft Rail Plan team

Email only to: DraftNZRailPlan@transport.govt.nz

Dear sir or madam,

DRAFT NEW ZEALAND RAIL PLAN – MANAWATU-WHANGANUI REGIONAL TRANSPORT COMMITTEE SUBMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft New Zealand Rail Plan (Rail Plan).

This feedback is made on behalf of the Manawatū-Whanganui Regional Transport Committee (RTC) which consists of representatives from:

- Horizons Regional Council;
- Horowhenua District Council;
- Manawatu District Council;
- Palmerston North City Council;
- Rangitikei District Council;
- Ruapehu District Council;
- Tararua District Council;
- Whanganui District Council; and
- The New Zealand Transport Agency

The Manawatū-Whanganui Region encompasses a broad area extending from south of Levin to north of Taumarunui and across to the east. Given the central location of the region, it is an important conduit of freight and people around the North Island. There are key transport corridors, both road and rail, within the region.

The RTC **strongly supports** the integration of rail into the land transport planning and investment framework. Rail is an integral part of the land transport network and with adequate planning and investment will be key to achieving the outcomes sought in the draft GPS.

1. General

On the whole, the RTC generally **supports** the strategic direction and intent of the draft Rail Plan and makes the following comments and observations in relation to the draft document for the Ministry's consideration.

The RTC notes that the draft Rail Plan was developed prior to the impacts of Covid-19 being fully realised. The RTC is aware that the effects and subsequent economic impacts mean that both central and local government are having to re-prioritise their programmes to drive economic recovery. Given the role movement of freight will play in economic recovery, the RTC is interested to understand whether investment in the rail network will be increased to help support development of rail and supporting infrastructure to increase freight movement by rail. The RTC see a real opportunity to fast-track freight movement by rail in our Region due to the connections with key rail freight networks to Wellington, Auckland, Gisborne and New Plymouth. Development of the proposed KiwiRail Central North Island Freight Hub will be key to achieving a secure and efficient distribution point for New Zealand, particularly in the North Island. However, the RTC also wishes to note that critical to the success of the Rail Hub (and any other rail hub in the region) will be development and maintenance of secure and efficient road connections, in this case the proposed Regional Freight Ring Road. It is important that the Rail Plan and GPS are aligned in this space.

Regarding the structure of the draft Rail Plan, the RTC acknowledges that the Plan does not provide a definitive list of investments for rail over the next decade or provide a funding commitment for any projects that are listed. However, the RTC notes that mention of these projects and timing provides a strong signal of Government's commitment to rail and will inform future funding decisions through both the Rail National Investment Plan (RNIP) and to some extent the GPS. For this reason, the RTC considers that the draft Rail Plan should take a further step and identify the high level priorities and opportunities for every region in the Country both in the short and long term, rather than focusing on the major metropolitan areas.

2. Strategic priorities – Part A (planning and funding framework)

The RTC **supports** the strategic priorities within the draft Rail Plan and **agrees** that rail contributes significant value to New Zealand and if performing well, will deliver positive social, economic and environmental benefits. Good planning and investment into this system will also realise the GPS goals

The planning and funding framework outlined in Part A is a good start and is clearly explained. The RTC **generally supports** the proposed planning framework and makes the following notes:

- The RTC **requests** that all regions be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the RNIP in its draft form. The RNIP outlines KiwiRail's planned three year investment, so early engagement will be key to understanding any proposed projects within each region and therefore planning/providing for these when developing or reviewing Regional Land Transport Plans (RLTPs).
- The RTC understands the reasons behind the Government's focus on the Wellington and Auckland metropolitan rail networks and the planning framework that is proposed for these areas. However, the RTC wishes to signal our **concern** that this focus is too narrow and will mean that investment opportunities outside these regions will be missed due to lack of funding. Given the Horizons' region's connection to Wellington in particular, the RTC is **concerned** that inter-regional rail opportunities in our region will not be adequately planned or invested in under the current approach.
- The RTC **suggests** that the draft Rail Plan's consideration of future opportunities be expanded to include recognition that increased passenger travel within and between regions will contribute to reduction of carbon emissions and is a more sustainable alternative to private cars. To provide for this, the RTC notes the current funding

model for passenger rail and including non-metro passenger rail model would likely need to be reviewed.

To re-iterate, the RTC **considers** rail an important part of the land transport network and if planned and adequately invested in, will play a key role in improving New Zealand's freight connections, passenger travel options, road safety and mitigating the effects of climate change. The key here is that this is applied across the Country and not just in major metropolitan areas, to avoid the system becoming disjointed.

3. Strategic Priorities – Part B (investment priorities for rail)

The RTC **generally supports** the strategic investment priorities outlined in the draft Rail Plan. As noted above, the RTC understands that the draft Rail Plan does not provide a complete list of investments for rail over the life of the Plan, however there are some investment opportunities mentioned that pertain specifically to the Horizons region which we wish to make comment on.

3.1. **Central North Island Freight Hub:** Page 27 outlines a list of key priorities for investment over the next decade. Given the level of effort and the benefits associated with the Central North Island Freight Hub identified for Palmerston North, the RTC **requests** that this project be explicitly identified on the list of key priorities on:

- page 27, or the future opportunities listed on page 28 and 31 of the draft Rail Plan.
- the RTC is **pleased** to note the Central North Island Freight hub is specifically mentioned under the "enabling regional development and connectivity through the PGF" as an investment priority. However, reference to key regional development projects should be mentioned throughout the Plan as they will be key to the success of improving use of Rail and subsequently economic recovery throughout the country.

3.2. **Capital Connection Passenger Rail Service:** The RTC is pleased to see the Capital Connection passenger service between Wellington and Palmerston North identified within the "Enhanced Inter-regional services" strategic priority. The Capital Connection is a critical and well-used service which connects people in the Horizons region with Wellington and vice versa. The RTC supports the comments that the service runs close to capacity, with approximately 135,000 passenger trips per year, but currently uses older rolling stock which is nearing its end of life and needs to be either refurbished or replaced.

The RTC wishes to re-inforce that investment in this service is a high priority in order for the service to continue. At present significant work and expense has gone into securing a short term option to keep the service functioning but additional investment is going to be required to retain this important service beyond 2025.

3.3. **Other investment opportunities**

Whanganui to Castlecliff rail line: The RTC **supports** reference to the Whanganui to Castlecliff rail line as an investment priority. Upgrades to this line are necessary to support resilience and reliability in this area.

Dannevirke log hub: The RTC **supports** the construction of a log hub in Dannevirke as an investment priority. This will significantly improve the impacts the region sees on our roads from forestry and logging activities.

Marion Rail Hub: The RTC **advises** that a project to construct a rail hub at Marion is under consideration by the Provincial Growth Fund. This project is associated with the development of a bioforestry plant and a district plan change to create a new industrial zone of 207 hectares. This will provide employment opportunities, facilitate movement of logs from the central North Island by rail to Wellington and provide opportunities for adding value and sustainable products from logs.

Given the opportunities associated with the Marion Rail Hub and on the basis that it is being considered by the PGF, the RTC **requests** this project be included in either the list of 'Investment Priorities' or 'Future Opportunities' on page 41 of the draft Rail Plan.

Levin Rail Hub: The RTC wishes to highlight another rail investment opportunity in our region, the Levin Rail Hub and advancing a Rail Station Access Plan for the Levin Station. These projects will identify measures to improve access, integration and functionality of the Levin Station and improve connections to Palmerston North and Wellington. Given the proximity of Levin to Wellington, it would seem logical to include this as part of the consideration of the wider Wellington metropolitan rail network.

Tourism: The RTC wishes to highlight that there are areas of the region, specifically Ruapehu which rely heavily on tourism. In this area, there are established rail corridors which could easily be updated and the number of stops increased to provide a travel option for tourists thereby injecting money into the economy for the region.

4. Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Rail Plan. The RTC supports the overall direction the draft Rail Plan. We look forward to seeing the outcomes from this consultation phase and any changes that may be made in response.

We do not wish to be heard in respect of this feedback but welcome any questions of clarification.

If there are any questions, please contact Leana Shirley, Senior Transport Planner on leana.shirley@horizons.govt.nz or Rhona Hewitt, Transport Services Manager on rhona.hewitt@horizons.govt.nz

Yours sincerely,



Rachel Keedwell
CHAIR
HORIZONS REGIONAL COUNCIL