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Submission to Environment Waikato on the 2010 Draft Annual Plan

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Organisation: Living streets Hamilton

We would firstly like to summarise the points raised in our written submission, then elaborate on the funding issues:

Bus services:

- We congratulate EW on the steady improvements in the Hamilton bus service but wish to express our concern that further development may be hampered by efforts to minimise rate increases. Short-term savings may lead to very large long-term costs.
- Hamilton needs adequate bus services at peak times. The Orbiter is already stretched and failing to cope at peak commuter hours. This runs the risk of the service being abandoned in favour of private vehicles. More buses are needed and we request that EW lobby central government for assistance.
- It is important that the service be cheap, efficient and accessible. We recommend rates increases rather than fare increases to keep the bus services as accessible as possible to the widest section of the population.
- To promote integrated alternative transport, we ask that EW install bike racks on the front of buses as soon as possible.

Trains:

- There is huge public support for a commuter train to Auckland, and there has been recent expression of interest from the business community in Newmarket, who recognise the importance of being in easy contact with the 350,000 potential customers in the Waikato area.
- This is the cheapest time to get the service going. If we wait, the rolling stock will no longer be available.
- The apparent cost could be outweighed by the savings in public health costs and the increased productivity of workers travelling to Auckland, who would be less stressed and in fact able to work and conduct meetings on the train.
- The train would help reduce the loading on the Auckland Hamilton motorway and may reduce the currently appalling Waikato road toll.

Funding:

We recognise that EW cannot meet the costs of major public transport schemes alone, or in combination with HCC. It should not have to. The benefits are of national significance and it is important that EW present the strongest possible case to parliament for increased government funding to local transport initiatives.

The recent Regional Cycling and Walking Strategy, 2009-2015, places great emphasis on the positive health outcomes of a usable cycling and walking infrastructure. The savings to government in health costs, both in terms of reduced road accidents, and in terms of improvement in chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease, would be likely to far outweigh the costs of improving rail services (a few million to get the commuter service running) providing funding for new buses (perhaps another few million) and extending funding for active transport initiatives such as improvements to footpaths, road crossings and cycle lanes.

As a member of the steering group involved with the development of the strategy, I attended the meeting held at the launch of the document. At that meeting, attendees rated the 34 actions listed in chapter 5. **The most important, addressing public health, requires new infrastructure, which costs serious money.**

The second highest priority was finding alternative sources of funding.

A large number of us involved in the development of this document, not just active transport advocates but also streets engineers in smaller Waikato towns, view the strategy as a wonderful idea, but one which cannot be implemented unless government funding is provided. We realise that major improvements to infrastructure are costly, and although local ratepayers can probably tolerate more than the Rates Control team think, they certainly can't be expected to fund major public works. Large amounts of money, time and energy have already gone into the development of the strategy document. Some effort should now go into making sure it can be implemented.

We request:

- That EW and HCC hold urgent consultations to produce a strong joint approach to central government to present the case for increased funding for works other than state highway construction. There is an adequate case in terms of savings in public health, let alone the future-proofing which is needed to protect New Zealand against forthcoming fuel costs and shortages. It would be an even stronger case if Regional Authorities throughout the country combined forces to present this argument to parliament.
- That there should also be a strong protest made by both EW and HCC over the manner in which the 11,500 signature petition for the commuter rail service between Hamilton and Auckland was dismissed by the parliamentary committee. The grounds used were inaccurate, in that Hamilton City Council had definitely not refused to consider putting in funding for the service. Such misrepresentation by one of Hamilton's elected MPs prevented the taking of submissions on the matter and has denied a very large number of local residents the chance to make their case to central government.