



Waka Kotahi NZTA regional infrastructure delivery manager Jo Wilton and Fulton Hogan project manager Blair Jacobs on the new bypass bridge beside the old tunnel access. SIMON O'CONNOR/STUFF

Last toot for Awaikino tunnel

Roading
Mike Watson

Taranaki's northern gateway is about to get a little wider, and more welcoming, for visitors.

Since 1924, motorists and trucks have waited in a queue as oncoming traffic inched its way through the one-lane Awaikino Gorge tunnel on State Highway 3.

In a few days the waiting game will be a thing of the past as the \$50.1 million Awaikino tunnel bypass project is fully opened to all vehicles.

Two double-lane bridges, named Herangi and Aorangi, span the Awaikino River to divert traffic away from the tunnel, close to the historic Otiao Pa.

New Plymouth trucking company owner Graeme Sole, of GJ Transport, is one among many motorists not regretting the end of the tunnel access.

"It will be absolutely marvellous," he said.

Journeys involving oversized loads would no longer need to divert through Bulls on State Highway 1, or via Marokopa, west of Awaikino, he said.

"We will not have to worry about height and width restrictions through the tunnel, or slowing down to give way at the entrance."

The road will be safer, and travel time 2-3 hours quicker without having to divert to SH1, he said.

"Those diversions will be well behind us now."

The bridge diversion is part of a 2.3km long project to improve safety on State Highway 3 north of the Awaikino gorge to Hammond's Hill.

Fulton Hogan project manager Blair Jacobs said the 18-month construction programme had not been without its challenges.

"One of the hardest parts was drilling down 20m into the hard limestone rock, and also preventing water seeping in through the soft mudstone when the bridge piles were put in," he said.

The workforce, which reached 70 at peak periods, endured cold, wet winters, and hot dusty summer conditions, as well as isolation from families during the working week to complete the project on time.

"It's been very pleasing to finish the project on schedule and within budget," Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport Agency regional infrastructure delivery manager Jo Wilton said.

Project objectives for road safety, resilience and connectivity for communities using State Highway 3 have all been met, she added.

"It's been a fantastic, well-managed project to be involved in. "It's a stunning part of the country with spectacular scenery."

Up to 300,000 cubic metres of earthworks went into creating the new highway and bridge bypass, including building 13 culverts and seven retaining walls.

A landscaped rest area will allow motorists to take full advantage of the area's cultural history, with information provided on story boards, Wilton said.

Motorists taking a driving break will be able to walk from the rest area and under the bridge to the tunnel, which will be fenced off at the northern entrance.

The project also included a 700m long north-bound passing lane and stock underpass.

The project's \$50.1m price tag included \$37.5m construction costs, as well as a detailed business case, pre-implementation, property costs, Covid-19 delay costs, resource consents, monitoring and quality assurance.