

Quintessential back road: pricey access



Transport

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It is the \$40,000 definition of the middle of nowhere – a mostly-gravel road running through some of Taranaki's most spectacular and isolated countryside.

But with a maintenance cost of about \$10 for each of the 10 cars that drive this way each day, Kiwi Rd is also one of the more expensive roadways in the region.

The district council spends 20 times as much per user on this 19km stretch, which runs parallel to State Highway 3, about 56km northeast of New Plymouth, than it does on the city's main arterial routes of Tukapa St, which is used by 4500 cars a day, or Devon St East, which is used by 17,500.

The condition of the road and its future were discussed at a New Plymouth District Council performance committee meeting last week.

The committee was considering plans to close the road for a few hours in November for the Silver Fern Rally.

Chair of the Clifton Community Board Ken Bedford told the meeting they did not oppose the closure of the road for the rally but had concerns over the road's "very poor" state of repair.

A slip on the north side of the tunnel had closed the road for some time, the meeting was told.

Council has an open resolution which allows it to consult the community on winding down the maintenance of part of Kiwi Rd, and closing the road up to the tunnel, "abandoning the infrastructure".

"I will acknowledge that the maintenance of Kiwi Rd is deliberately kept to a low standard," infrastructure manager David Langford said.

"It's consistent with the level of use that road gets.

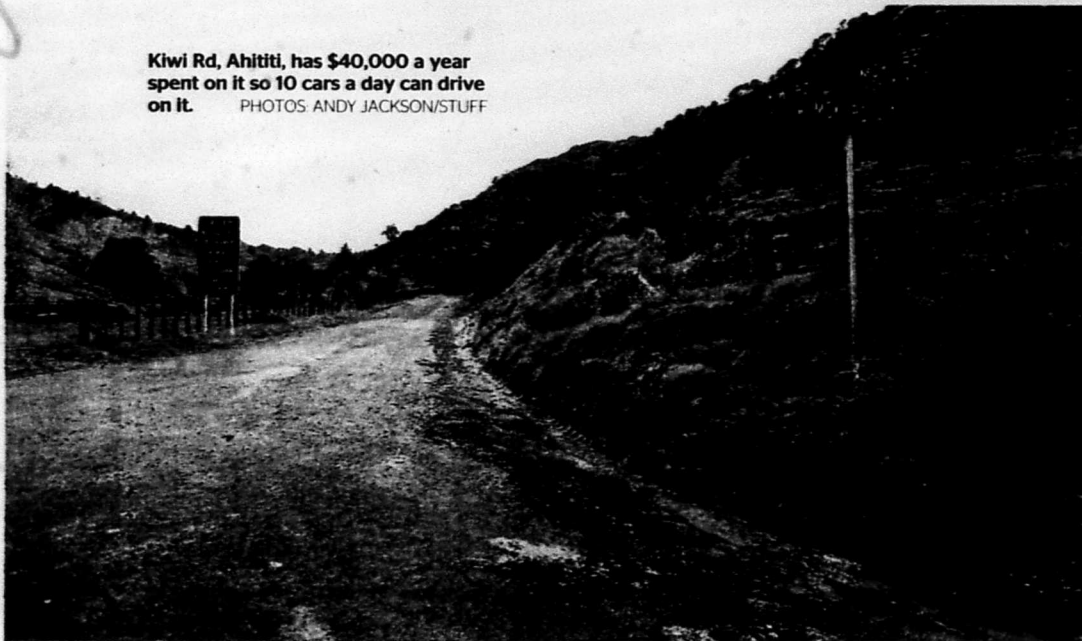
"It is an economic challenge to maintain this level of road."

He added: "Overall we spend about \$430,000 a year retmetalling our unsealed roads, Kiwi Rd included in that.

"I think on average my team

Kiwi Rd, Ahititi, has \$40,000 a year spent on it so 10 cars a day can drive on it.

PHOTOS ANDY JACKSON/STUFF



The condition of the road deteriorates after the tunnel. The council has an option to eventually close the rest of the road.

tells me we spend about \$40,000 on Kiwi Rd itself."

A visit to Kiwi Rd on Tuesday showed the challenge the council's maintenance teams face.

It is in the wilds of northeast Taranaki, and at times feels more like a goat track than a road.

A sign warns that the road is not suitable for heavy vehicles or caravans, and that it will take you to what used to be SH40 (now just Okau Rd). It is all loose gravel, punctuated occasionally by tarseal, mostly on the hills (presumably so we can all get up said hills).

Apart from the wild goats, the odd loose cow and a few stray sheep, there wasn't a soul to be seen.

Attempts to talk to residents of the road – of which there are only a handful – came up empty, apart from one homestead, which featured a pack of over-enthusiastic puppies.

Most of the surface is in good condition, and the scenery is breathtaking, but it's a winding track and the edges are starting to slip away in places.

Once at the tunnel, the road is freshly metalled but drops down-

"It is an economic challenge to maintain this level of road."

NPDC infrastructure manager David Langford

hill and deteriorates to the point where normal two-wheel-drive cars are at risk of getting stuck.

But Bedford said these isolated, almost forgotten roads played an important role, even with few residents on them.

"Any road closure is a big issue for the rural farms.

"It's not so much the residents as the access to the back country."

Warren Petersen, who is also on the Clifton Board and lives nearby, said he had not driven the road for several years but thought it had to stay open.

"It's a loop road ... If the Uruti Road is closed and Kiwi is open you can get out."

But it has a lot of history with the early settlers, he said.

"A lot of people just go on there to look at the tunnel.

"I would hate to see it closed."