



Pothole province

Northland's roads are crumbling. Reporter **Jenny Ling** and AA Northland District Council chairwoman **Tracey Rissetto** hit the road to highlight just how bad they have become.

The road trip began in the Far North on a dismal rainy morning.

It was sparked following the Automobile Association's recent call for critical funding for repair and maintenance work to Northland's roads.

So, AA Northland District Council chairwoman Tracey Rissetto and I hopped in her car to see just how bad they have become.

Though we covered a fraction of the region's vast roading network on March 29, we gathered plenty of evidence.

It confirmed what most Northlanders already know – that our roads are crumbling.

Rissetto calls them “unsafe”.

“Over the years constant underfunding has impacted on road safety,” she said.

“For the last six to eight years successive governments have been underfunding roading so they're deteriorating. It's created the perfect storm, more traffic and less money spent on our roads.”

The 80km trip began in Kawakawa and went north to Pakaraka, Kerikeri, west along Wiroa and Waiare roads to Ōkaihau and along Te Pua Rd near Lake Omapere. Then we travelled back through Ōhaeawai, Pakaraka and Moerewa, finishing in Kawakawa.

The journey covered parts of SH1, 10,

15 and 12, along with local roads.

The AA reckons the region's 986km of state highway and 6000km of local roads are dire.

Rissetto stops short of calling them a joke.

But she calls Kawakawa's notorious Three Bridges “Noddy bridges” because they're so old, and driving over their narrow little humps is like being in a Noddy car.

They're “not fit for purpose”, she said, just as logging trucks travelling the opposite direction on each bridge squeezed past us.

The trucks kept coming as we drove through Moerewa, where 80 per cent of the state highway going north and south was a continuous stretch of bare chip seal.

These sprawling bald areas, along with patched, slumping, slippery surfaces are dangerous, Rissetto said.

Shoddy road maintenance affects a vehicle's grip with the road, its risk of

skidding and the driver losing control.

They are not all so bad; improvements have been done to the network.

Rissetto acknowledges the Akerama improvement project, which covered a section of SH1 near Hūkerenui, and there's a “beautiful stretch of road” on SH10 near Pakaraka.

“Apart from that they've all been patched up,” she said.

“If you look at Moerewa, they're indescribable. How much worse can they get?”

IT'S THIS lack of maintenance that's impacting on safety and contributing to accidents and deaths.

Northland has the highest rate of road deaths in New Zealand per head of population, the AA says.

Fatalities in Northland per 100,000 population in 2020 when 28 people died was 14.4, while the national



average was 6.3.

Though there are various factors involved in the crashes, research has shown the link between road maintenance and safety.

It's why the AA's campaign to revitalise road maintenance across the country, started in Northland.

Almost an extra \$1 billion is needed over the next three years just to clear essential maintenance work on the nation's roads, the organisation says. Of this, at least \$60-70 million is needed in Northland.

Rissetto explained the numerous "pinch points" on Northland roads, which are particularly unsafe for motorists and unsuitable for heavy traffic.

The southern side of the Brynderwyn Hills are one: "You know it's difficult to drive. That part of the road is unkind."

Another is the broken 20km of SH1 near Mangamuka Gorge, closed since torrential rain caused massive slips last July, which "shows poor resilience of the state highway network".

The drive between Whangārei and Kawakawa is "appalling", she said.

There are numerous bad patches around Towai, Waiomio and the Maromaku turnoff, and patched and slumping surfaces south of Hūkerenui.

Northland roads are tiring to drive, the level of concentration needed to navigate poor roads adding to driver fatigue.

THE REASON for the roads being so bad are two-fold,

Rissetto said. Firstly, there's been a big increase in traffic movements.

State highway use has increased 31 per cent in the past decade and heavy vehicle traffic — which does more damage to the road — has increased 21 per cent.

Local road use has increased 21 per cent.

This is due, in part, to the region's key industries like forestry, horticulture

and agriculture and farming which are all heavy traffic users.

Then there's the main problem — the lack of government funding over many years.

Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency agrees there are growing demands on the roading network, and an increase of heavy vehicles on the roads. It concedes there is "limited funding".

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Far North Mayor John Carter rates the district's roads 5 out of 10.



Kaipara Mayor Jason Smith rates his roads 5 out of 10.



From roads to ruins



Intersection SH1 & SH15



SH1 Moerewa



Ohaeawai



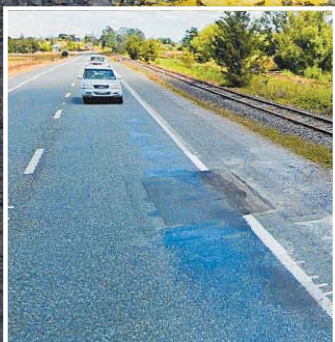
Pakaraka



Turntable Hill



Kerikeri



SH1 Hukerenui



SH1 near Maromaku



SH1 near Waiomio

How's your road?

Is there a stretch of highway you would like to see fixed?

Let us know: reporters@northernadvocate.co.nz



Roads to ruins

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Waka Kotahi's Northland system manager Jacqui Hori-Hoult said in the current 2018-2021 period, \$38m was invested to repair and resurface 574 lane km of Northland state highways.

This is part of a much larger three-year investment of \$109m to maintain Northland's state highways and includes other important maintenance work like upgrading guard rails, repainting markings and trimming trees.

"We are working hard to optimise our road maintenance and renewal work at a time when there is a finite amount of funding available and growing demands on the roading network," Hori-Hoult said.

"To optimise the limited funding, we have also installed more preventive measures such as building more retaining walls around slip sites to minimise their impact and build resilience. We have also moved to more high strength roading surfaces."

Rissetto said the current funding formula doesn't allow for Northland's unique geology, which includes clay soil. It's also more expensive to transport materials, she said.

"We are more expensive to build up here, but we get the same funding per kilometre as Waikato or Central Plateau."

It's time to focus on the safety of the roads. Motorists pay billions in fuel tax and road user charges each year.

Yet the reality is fuel tax and road user charges are spread across all transport projects including public transport, walking and cycling projects, as well as roads.

Reducing speed limits, as the Far North District Council did to 60 roads in the district in January in a bid to improve road safety, was a positive step, she said.

Transport Minister Michael Wood acknowledged Northland "needs more sustained investment" in its roads, and said he planned to visit the region in May.

"I recognise Northland, like many of our regions, needs more sustained investment to help it flourish. We made a good start last term with initiatives like the Provincial Growth Fund, but there is more to do."

After spotting uneven surfaces at the intersection of SH1 and SH15 between Ōkaihau and Ōhaeawai, Rissetto summed up the trip and delivers her verdict.

"We met quite a bit of heavy transport and the heavy vehicle transport movements are on the increase which reflects the change in the economy up here. What we drove was an example of what the roads are like in Northland. Generally, the roads are not safe to drive on. It's just not acceptable and something needs to be done."