

7.5 Te Waihou Walkway - Demand Management and Infrastructure Planning

Report To:	Growth & Infrastructure Committee
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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present the Growth and Infrastructure Committee with the findings of the draft Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment for Leslie Road and the Te Waihou-Blue Springs car park, and to seek the Committee's recommendation to Council on future demand management and infrastructure options.

Recommendation

That the Growth and Infrastructure Committee:

- a. Receives and notes the Te Waihou Walkway - Demand Management and Infrastructure Planning Report (Resolve # 2026-105).
- b. Notes the findings of the draft Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment and that short-term safety and operational improvements will be progressed using existing roading budgets and work programmes
- c. Recommends to Council that Option 4: Combined Model be progressed for further investigation, including consideration of associated infrastructure enhancements
- d. Requests that a future report be provided to Council with detailed options, indicative costs, and proposed timeframes for implementation, including a project or programme plan for future investment and demand management.

Executive Summary

Visitor numbers at the Te Waihou Walkway continue to grow and now exceed 100,000 annually, placing pressure on Leslie Road, the Te Waihou-Blue Springs car park, and surrounding infrastructure.

A draft Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment (TIA) has recently been completed to evaluate the safety and operational performance of Leslie Road and the car park. The draft findings indicate that traffic volumes have increased significantly and that current parking and access arrangements are operating near or beyond capacity during peak periods.

Longer-term demand management options considered include park and ride, paid on-site parking, and a combined model integrating both approaches. Based on options analysis and the draft TIA findings, the combined model is considered the most balanced option for further investigation as it would reduce pressure on Leslie Road while improving visitor management.

Committee direction is sought to endorse the Combined Model for further investigation and recommend this approach to Council. A future report will present detailed options, indicative costs, and implementation timeframes to support a subsequent Council decision.

Context

The Te Waihou Walkway is a highly visited natural attraction, with annual visitation now estimated to exceed 100,000 people. Growth in visitor numbers, driven largely by social media exposure and domestic tourism, is placing increasing pressure on Leslie Road, the Te Waihou-Blue Springs car park, and surrounding infrastructure.

Leslie Road is a narrow rural road shared by residents, freight, and visitor vehicles, with traffic volumes growing from 466 vehicles per day in 2023 to approximately 886 vehicles per day in 2025 (a 90% increase). Whites Road, as part of the NZTA Waka Kotahi State Highway network, is designed for higher traffic volumes but is also experiencing additional pressures due to visitor use.

The Te Waihou-Blue Springs car park on Leslie Road operates at or near capacity during peak periods, resulting in some visitors parking in unsafe locations outside the carpark.

Crash analysis shows seven incidents at the Leslie/Whites Road intersection over five years, including one serious crash in 2025. Additional non-injury incidents occur along Leslie Road beyond the car park. Traffic volumes, road geometry, limited delineation, and pedestrian movements contribute to current safety concerns.

Visitor patterns are concentrated in peak periods, with short dwell times and minimal local spending. This contributes to traffic and parking pressures while limiting the economic benefit to nearby townships.

A draft Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment was commissioned to evaluate safety, road suitability, and operational performance, and to provide recommendations for short- and medium-term improvements.

In addition to the Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment, we have reviewed visitor management approaches used at comparable high-visitation natural attractions across New Zealand, including demand management tools such as remote parking, shuttle services, and paid parking. We have also considered current paid parking trials undertaken by the Department of Conservation, which include provision for local residents to purchase annual parking passes at a low flat fee. These examples have helped inform the range of demand management options considered for the Te Waihou Walkway.

Discussion

Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment

The Traffic Impact and Route Suitability Assessment (TIA) evaluated Leslie Road and the Te Waihou carpark to determine their capacity, operational performance, and safety in response to growing visitor demand. Observations and data indicate that both the car park and on-street parking along Leslie Road are operating at, and at times beyond, intended capacity. This leads to unsafe parking behaviours, restricted sightlines, and increased risk of conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians.

Key Findings

- Traffic to Leslie Road has grown substantially since 2023, driven primarily by tourism to the Blue Springs walkway.
- Leslie Road's narrow carriageway, limited shoulders, and constrained geometry—particularly near curves and crests—limit safe vehicle movements.
- Inconsistent signage, road markings, and speed transition treatments reduce compliance and contribute to risk, particularly near the car park.
- Pedestrians move across Leslie Road and within the car park at unplanned locations, with no formal crossings or guided pathways to the walkway entrance.

- The car park is unsealed, unmarked, and lacks formal bus bays, resulting in inefficient space use and occasional blockages.

Implications

The combination of high visitor numbers, road geometry constraints, and insufficient car park facilities creates ongoing safety concerns. Peak periods, particularly weekends, see the car park filled beyond capacity, leading to unsafe roadside parking and increased potential for vehicle-pedestrian conflicts. Given projections for continued visitor growth, these pressures are expected to intensify unless mitigations are implemented.

Recommended Actions

The assessment proposes a staged programme to manage current and future demand:

Quick Wins (0-6 months)

- Trim vegetation to restore sightlines and EMP visibility
- Install or relocate key signage, directional arrows, and “No stopping” plates
- Correct existing signage errors and mow grass to improve visibility near the car park entrance.

Short Term (6-18 months)

- Introduce a conspicuous speed threshold treatment at the 100-50 km/h transition
- Seal the car park, mark bays, provide dedicated bus bays, and construct a splitter island for safer entry/exit
- Provide a formal pedestrian crossing aligned with desire lines and guide pedestrians to the walkway entrance.

Medium to Long Term (18+ months)

- Extend the car park and provide overflow capacity, including potential park and ride options
- Localised road widening on curves and selected straights to accommodate rising traffic
- Consider paid parking to improve turnover and regulate peak demand
- Investigate off-road walking paths or separated pedestrian shoulders near the car park.

The full TIA is appended to this report for reference.

Demand Management Options

Visitor demand is the primary driver of traffic congestion, safety risks, environmental pressures, and community impacts along Leslie Road and at the Te Waihou-Blue Springs Walkway.

The current unmanaged status quo presents escalating strategic, financial, and safety risks, with Council facing rising operational costs while local economic returns from visitors remain limited. Effective demand management is essential to shape visitor behaviour, protect local roads and residents, and enable fair cost recovery.

Implementing a programme, whether through park and ride, on-site parking management, or a combined approach, will improve safety, enhance the visitor experience, and support local economic activity. The outcomes of the Traffic Impact Assessment, together with further investigation, will inform which model is most appropriate and how it should be implemented.

Option 1: Park and Ride

Under the Park and Ride model, visitors would park in the nearby Putāruru or Tīrau townships and travel to the Walkway via a shuttle service. Designated parking hubs could be established using existing or leased land, with shuttle operations running on a fixed route and timetable, focused on peak periods.

Ticketing could be managed online, with bundled options for families or groups. Similar systems have been successfully implemented at the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, Abel Tasman National Park, and Aoraki/Mount Cook, where shuttles provide structured access during peak periods. Typical shuttle fares range from \$20 to \$40 return, and operations are often seasonal, managed by private operators.

The Park and Ride model offers several advantages, including:

- significant reduction in traffic along Leslie Road
- improved visitor and pedestrian safety
- economic spillover to local towns
- a clearer visitor experience.

However, it relies on visitor behaviour change and consistent shuttle operations, and it may encounter initial resistance from visitors accustomed to direct vehicle access.

Option 2: On-Site Parking Management

The On-Site Parking Management option would involve introducing paid, pre-booked, or time-limited parking at the Leslie Road carpark, potentially at a premium relative to shuttle fares. Local residents could be offered discounted passes to maintain equity.

Online booking systems could manage daily or time-slot allocations, while enforcement could be achieved through licence plate recognition or on-site wardens.

Pilot programmes at Department of Conservation (DOC) sites demonstrate that paid parking can support site management and improve public acceptance over time. These programmes have allowed local residents to purchase low-cost annual passes, while generating revenue for site maintenance and visitor management. On-site parking management offers controlled parking operations and supports equity for residents. However, it may not significantly reduce overall road traffic and requires robust enforcement to maintain compliance.

Option 3: Combined Model

The Combined Model integrates limited premium on-site parking with a Park and Ride shuttle service. This approach provides flexibility for visitors, reduces congestion, and prevents overloading Leslie Road during peak periods.

By encouraging multi-stop visits in Putāruru and Tīrau, it also delivers economic benefits to local communities and generates dual revenue streams through both parking fees and shuttle fares.

Compared with Options 1 and 2, the Combined approach is more inclusive, provides greater visitor choice, and better aligns with economic and community objectives, while supporting sustainable visitor management.

Future Infrastructure Investment

To support safe access, manage visitor demand, and enhance the overall experience at the Te Waihou-Blue Springs, several future infrastructure investments should be investigated and considered.

Leslie Road Carpark Extension

The existing car park at Leslie Road is approaching capacity during peak periods, contributing to unsafe on-road parking. An extension of the car park, designed to approximately double its current size, would remove the need for on-road parking and improve operational efficiency. Landowner support for the expansion has been confirmed, with indicative costs estimated between \$500,000 and \$600,000.

Leslie Road Toilet Facility

The current toilet facility near the main viewing deck is aging and does not meet projected visitor numbers. Replacement with a culturally and environmentally appropriate facility around the Leslie Road carpark should be considered, increasing capacity from a single pan to multiple pans. The indicative cost for this upgrade could be between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

Alternative Whites Road Carpark

The existing layover zone along Whites Road is not designed to accommodate visitor parking, yet rising visitor numbers are increasing pressure on this area. Further discussions with NZTA Waka Kotahi could explore the feasibility of a purpose-built car park that provides safer, long-term parking solutions while accommodating future growth. Any such option would need to consider operational requirements, site constraints, and potential impacts on traffic flow.

Parking Review in Putāruru and Tīrau

A review of parking supply in nearby townships could be undertaken to assess opportunities to support future Park-and-Ride initiatives. This review would examine the capacity and location of existing parking, potential for expansion, and any implications for local businesses, ensuring that visitor parking strategies support both safe transport operations and economic activity in the towns.

Visitor Experience Enhancements

If Council were to introduce measures such as paid on-site parking or a Park and Ride shuttle service, complementary investments in the visitor experience could help provide added value and justify these initiatives. Potential enhancements could include landscaping and planting, the addition of viewing platforms, and incorporation of cultural elements such as pou and interpretive signage. Additional improvements might include wayfinding, picnic areas, and rest facilities. These enhancements would aim to create a more engaging and enjoyable experience for visitors while supporting the overall objectives of demand management and safety. Indicative costs for these potential upgrades are yet to be determined.

Collectively, these investments aim to address current and projected pressures, improve safety and operational efficiency, and provide an enriched experience for visitors while supporting the surrounding communities.

Options

The following options are presented for the Committee's consideration when determining its recommendation to Council regarding future demand management at the Te Waihou–Blue Springs Walkway.

It is recommended that **Option 4: Combined Model** be progressed for further investigation, with staff to report back with detailed options, indicative costs, and implementation timeframes to inform a future Council decision.

Option 1: Status Quo

Continue managing the Walkway under the current access and parking arrangements, with only routine maintenance and operational improvements delivered through existing Council work programmes. No formal demand management measures would be introduced.

Option 2: On-Site Parking Management

Introduce management of the Leslie Road car park through measures such as paid parking, time limits, or pre-booked parking. This option would retain direct vehicle access to the Walkway while introducing mechanisms to regulate parking demand and support cost recovery.

Option 3: Park and Ride

Introduce a Park and Ride model where visitors park in the nearby Putāruru or Tīrau townships and travel to the Walkway via a shuttle service. This option would reduce vehicle traffic along Leslie Road and support economic activity in surrounding town centres.

Option 4: Combined Model

Introduce a combined approach incorporating limited managed parking at Leslie Road alongside a Park-and-Ride shuttle service from nearby townships. This option would provide visitors with multiple access options while helping to manage peak demand and reduce pressure on Leslie Road.

Linkage to Strategic Plan Priorities

Healthy proud and connected community

Environmental sustainability

Economic development

Durable infrastructure

Consultation (Internal and External)

Ongoing consultation and engagement will be critical to the successful management and long-term development of the Te Waihou-Blue Springs Walkway. Engagement will build on discussions initiated during the previous work programme when the Walkway was temporarily closed, which identified early opportunities and considerations but have not been formally progressed. Reengaging formally with these partners is essential to ensure alignment and establish a true long-term partnership.

Raukawa and Adjacent Landowners

Raukawa and landowners along the Walkway are key partners in the future planning and management of the site. Council previously engaged and worked closely with Raukawa and adjacent landowners during the walkway renewal and upgrade works when the Walkway was temporarily closed.

Initial discussions on the long-term future of the Walkway were also undertaken at that time; however, these conversations need to be formally picked up as soon as possible to ensure alignment and a true collaborative approach to demand management, infrastructure planning, and potential investment.

NZTA Waka Kotahi

The existing layover area at the Whites Road end is an NZTA Waka Kotahi asset and forms part of the state highway network. Engagement with NZTA Waka Kotahi will be required to explore options for future parking, access improvements, and any associated infrastructure.

Early coordination will ensure that proposed changes align with state highway requirements, road safety standards, and operational expectations.

Wider Community

The wider community, including residents along Leslie Road, have been expressing a desire for change in how demand management is handled. Feedback has been observed through social media, community hui, and public forum contributions at Council meetings, highlighting strong interest in seeing progress on long-term solutions.

It's important that Council continues to engage with the community and keeps them informed of any proposed changes, so they understand the rationale and support and buy into the outcomes.

Internal Stakeholders

Internal engagement with relevant Council teams, including roading, parks and reserves, will continue to ensure alignment across operational, maintenance, and visitor management responsibilities.

Financial Considerations

The short-term improvements identified through the TIA, including Quick Wins (0-6 months) and Short-Term (6-18 months) measures, could be delivered within existing roading maintenance and operational budgets.

Potential future infrastructure investments, including extension of the Leslie Road car park, replacement of the toilet facility, and possible visitor experience enhancements, will require future capital funding and could be considered through Council's Annual Plan and Long-Term Plan processes.

If demand management measures such as paid parking or a park and ride shuttle service were introduced, these would create opportunities for partial cost recovery through user charges. However, the financial viability, operational costs, and potential revenue streams associated with these models require further investigation.

Progressing Option 4: Combined Model for further investigation will enable the development of more detailed financial information, including indicative capital costs, operational funding requirements, and potential revenue sources, to inform a future Council decision.

Risks

1. Vehicle-Pedestrian Conflicts

Visitor numbers exceeding car park and roadside capacity could lead to unsafe parking, restricted sightlines, and potential vehicle-pedestrian incidents.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Implement Quick Wins and Short-Term improvements from the TIA, including signage, sightline clearing, car park markings, and formal pedestrian crossings
- Investigate longer-term car park extensions and demand management measures.

2. Increased Traffic Congestion and Road Network Pressure

Increasing visitor demand along Leslie Road creates increased congestion, slow-moving traffic, and impact local resident movements.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Explore demand management options, staged car park extensions, and targeted road improvements
- Monitor traffic volumes and adjust operational measures as required.

3. Community Dissatisfaction

If demand management does not meet community expectations, residents and local businesses may express dissatisfaction through complaints, social media, or community meetings.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Maintain proactive engagement with residents and communities, provide regular updates on proposed changes, and incorporate feedback into planning
- Ensure clear communication of rationale and benefits for any proposed interventions.

4. Cultural and Stakeholder Alignment

Future interventions could conflict with the expectations or interests of Raukawa and adjacent landowners if not properly engaged.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Re-engage Raukawa and adjacent landowners as key partners as soon as possible
- Incorporate their input into design, operational, and cultural considerations
- Ensure decisions align with long-term partnership objectives.

5. Financial and Funding

There is currently no allocated budget for future infrastructure upgrades, demand management measures, or visitor experience enhancements, which could delay implementation.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Conduct detailed financial analysis as part of Option 4, including indicative capital costs, operational requirements, and potential revenue streams
- Align proposed investments with Long Term Plan or Annual Plan processes to secure funding and enable staged implementation where appropriate.

6. Implementation and Timing

Without budgeted funding and confirmed demand management measures, there is a risk that infrastructure improvements or visitor management solutions may not be in place in time for the 2026-27 summer season, potentially prolonging safety and operational issues.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Prioritise investigation of Option 4 and associated infrastructure requirements to inform Council decisions on funding and delivery
- Develop a high-level programme plan to align approvals, consenting, and procurement processes with the 2026–27 summer timeframe
- Coordinate with key stakeholders, including NZTA Waka Kotahi, Raukawa, and adjacent landowners, to enable timely implementation.

7. Displacement of Visitor Pressure to Whites Road

If paid parking and shuttle services are implemented only at the Leslie Road end, visitor demand may shift to the Whites Road end, creating new traffic, parking, and safety pressures.

Mitigations/Controls:

- Progress in parallel a solution for Whites Road, including potential parking, shuttle, or traffic management interventions
- Work in partnership with NZTA Waka Kotahi and Raukawa to ensure any changes are coordinated
- Monitor visitor behaviour and adapt operational measures as required to mitigate unintended impacts.

Significance & Engagement Policy

The matters and recommendation contained in this report do not trigger Council's Significance and Engagement Policy.

Reference

N/A

Attachments

1. FINAL DRAFT - Te Waihou-Leslie Road - Traffic Impact Assessment and Route Suitability Assessment