



Omanawa Falls project

Community Meeting 16 June 2021 Summary of Feedback

Introduction

The Omanawa Falls is a spectacular waterfall dropping down into a large deep pool, surrounded by native bush. Due to a number of serious injuries and two fatalities in recent years the Omanawa Falls is closed to the public.

Omanawa Falls project is a partnership between Tauranga City Council, Ngāti Hangarau and Tourism Bay Of Plenty. We are committed to re-opening the Omanawa Falls, when it is safe to do so, with full consideration being given to the historical, cultural and environmental significance of this special site. The partners have agreed on a plan to provide access down to the Omanawa Falls that is both culturally and physically safe.

The below summary of feedback is taken from notes recorded by project representatives at a community meeting which was held with the residents of the Omanawa Community on 16 June 2021, 7pm at Omanawa Hall.

Project representatives included:

- Tauranga City Council (4 staff)
- Ngati Hangarau (1)
- Tourism Bay of Plenty (1)
- Project managers from Veros (2)
- Project planner from 4Sight (1)
- NZ Police were also in attendance (1)

Approximately 50 people from the community attended, including four members of the Ngati Hangarau hapu

The community were invited via:

- Direct emails to neighbours, and groups in the community such as the Kaimai Omanawa Rural Ratepayers Association, the Omanawa Hall Committee and the Sarona Park community.
- Facebook invite via Facebook pages: Kaimai Omanawa Facebook group and Kaimai Omanawa Alternative Facebook Group
- Letter drop to 100 households between 634 Omanawa Road and 1700 Omanawa Road

Overall impressions

There were a range of views present at the meeting.

Those in support of the project made comments such as the following:

- Glad something is being done (in particular – improving safety for visitors, providing safe access for local community and getting cars off the road)
- McLaren Falls is an amazing, well managed amenity, Omanawa will be the same.

- Ratepayers already pay for a lot of park amenity this is no different
- The proposal generally addresses existing issues and is a good solution – “it looks like the best that could be done”
- The project will create some good opportunities for locals, e.g. roadside fruit stalls, a café
- Omanawa Falls is an amazing asset and would be great to share with tourists

Those that didn't support the project didn't support it for a range of reasons. These reasons included:

- The project is a waste of money as nothing that we do is going to work
- Build a wall and lock it up for good
- Wish that things went back to how they used to be 10 years ago when nobody knew about the falls.
- That no public money should be spent and the land should be leased to a commercial entity to provide managed paid access
- That access without a guided tour will not be safe and will still result in accidents

There were a number of others at the community meeting that did not appear to have strong feelings in support or opposition but had a range of concerns and/or questions which they wanted to address.

The rest of this report summarises the concerns, questions and comments that were made by the community. The feedback is sorted into the following headings:

- Providing safe and/or managed access
- Access to water
- Tourism activities and use of the site
- Parking
- Roothing
- Signage
- Safety
- Cost
- Ownership
- Communication and Engagement
- Other

Providing safe and/or managed access

There were a number of questions and concerns around the nature of providing access. Overall there was support for providing safe public access, however there were a range of views about how this should be done. There was also recognition and great appreciation for the kaitiaki programme over the 2020/2021 summer provided by Ngati Hangarau and Tauranga City Council which successfully deterred most visitors.

Thoughts on unmanaged access included the following:

- Want free public access without having to book and go on a tour (unmanaged)
- Would like to be able to continue to access the water and to swim.

- Concerns that if the site is not managed there will be large numbers of visitors which will impact on the rural nature of the area
- Query about how many people will actually go to falls if they can't swim (i.e. not many people will want to go)

There was also support for a booking system:

- An internet booking system would be good so that people who turn up and don't have a booking can do so immediately whilst on site.

Questions and concerns around free public managed access through a booking system included:

- Free public managed access through a booking system won't work
- People will continue to try and access the site after hours once the track and car park are open (and trespass on people's property and knock on their doors etc.)
- Concerns that if the site is not adequately managed that the site will be flooded with people and lose its tranquil beauty
- The site needs permanent managed access 24/7 – to not only manage safety and numbers, but also so people don't go to the toilet in the bush
- Is there a way to provide free access for locals and paid access for everyone else?
- Can free managed or unmanaged public access exist alongside paid guided tours?

There were some that thought that access should only be managed through a paid guided tour:

- Free public access without a 'guided tour' will still result in injuries and fatalities
- Request for booked tours only

Others thought that free public access should only be provided to a point, with paid guided access from that point onwards.

- Free public access to one or both of the top landings with a view of the waterfall, and no public access beyond this point
- No access at all to the bottom of the waterfall (either unmanaged or guided).

Access to water

Once again there were a range of views about providing access to the water, and/or swimming in the water. There were a small number of people who wanted swimming at the falls to continue to be an option. The concerns with this were as follows:

- If swimming wasn't permitted, no-one would want to go there or pay to go there
- Disappointing if swimming won't be allowed

There were others who had concerns about whether access to the waterfall pool should be provided:

- How are we going to stop people from swimming?
- Concerns that there are significant safety issues associated with the water and that no-one should swim there
- Safety of people at the water's edge when water flow changes occur upstream of waterfall as part of hydro activity
- That access to the water is permitted under supervision – e.g. guided tours
- That visitors would continue to bring alcohol and sit at the waterfall pool for hours drinking

- How to stop people swimming or using bush at waterfall pool for toileting.
- Questions about a viewing platform near the water – whether it was needed, where it was located and whether it would encourage swimming.

Others thought that access to the water should be prevented, and that there was no need for a viewing platform adjacent to the waterfall pool.

It was also acknowledged that some households in the area get their water from Omanawa river. There were concerns that people swimming in the water, toileting in or near the water, being injured or drowning in the water would create health and safety issues for houses downstream who take water from the river for household use. It was suggested that water quality testing should be provided.

Tourism activities and use of the site

It seemed that there was recognition by a number of people that it may be possible to provide some kind of free public access while also providing a commercial tourism experience. There was support for

- Paid guided tours providing a cultural tourism experience
- Adventure tourism activities such as a zipline

There were also concerns as mentioned above:

- We should hand the management of the site over to a company to run a commercial activity.
- Concerns about the visual impact of some of the previously suggested tourism activities

Other ideas included:

- Will there be tours through the power station?
- Combining the engineering/hydro stories as well as the cultural stories and make it a place we can be really proud of.
- Idea raised about stopping the diversion of water at certain times of day so the falls could be viewed at their full flow. Agreement could be made with power station regarding reimbursement for lost revenue during these times.

There were also concerns about the proposed use of the site for events – in terms of the number of guests, the numbers of events, the hours of the events and whether alcohol would be available at the event.

Parking

Most people supported the provision of parking in order to get cars off the road. The feedback relating to car parking is as follows:

- Concerns that the car park is too big if the site is really going to be managed as proposed
- Concerns that the car park is too small and people will continue to park on the road and in front of driveways. In the peak of summer there can be 100 cars parked at the site – and that is with the track closed.
- Concern about buses parking in the car park. The bus parking should be at another location. Buses should drop people off and park elsewhere and come back to pick visitors up
- People want the Western Bay District Council to monitor and take action about the illegal parking.
- Regarding the finish of the car park and management of stormwater, some did not want a sealed, white line marked car park as this was not in keeping with rural environment

Roading

A number of concerns have been raised about roading in the area. Many of these matters will need to be discussed with the Western Bay District Council:

- The narrow section of road between Peers Road and Bonnieglenn Road needs to be widened
- The intersection between Omanawa Road and SH29 is unsafe and needs to be upgraded
- McLarens Falls Road needs to be upgraded
- Concerns that vehicles may want to access Omanawa Falls via McLarens Falls Road
- Western Bay District Council needs to do more about maintaining the roads
- Concerned about the amount of additional traffic that the Omanawa Falls project will generate on Omanawa Road and at the SH29 intersection. Traffic volumes in the Traffic Impact Assessment may be underestimated
- Question about whether Western Bay District Council and Waka Kotahi have seen the Traffic Impact Assessment and understand the traffic impacts of what is proposed.
- Concerned that sightlines around the carpark are not enough (and the speeds are too fast) – with a request that the corners be straightened or the road widened

Signage

Signage or the lack of it has been challenging for local residents. In order to improve safety and to reduce the number of visitors to Omanawa Falls while it remains closed signage to Omanawa Falls has been removed. On Google the label for Omanawa Falls has been moved away from the Omanawa Falls site to the more generic area. However, perseverant visitors are still looking for the Omanawa Falls on private property.

- A paper road which is access to a private property is labelled Omanawa Falls Road on Google maps. A large number of cars turn up there and access private property. Is there anything that Western Bay District Council or Google could do help?
- When the project is complete there needs to be clear signage on both the road and on Google maps so people don't visit private property looking for the falls.
- At Sarona Park - want signage and/or fencing along the property boundary where our track gets close to boundary to stop people entering private property
- Can Council influence the labels on Google maps which currently direct people to private property?
- Could more could be done to manage social media messaging about access to the site at present, prior to project completion?

Safety

Ideas about how to improve safety at the site were varied, ranging from identifying the need to complete the track and car park as soon as possible, to closing the site completely, or to only have a paid commercial experience with no access down to the waterfall pool. These have largely been commented on above. There were a few other concerns and questions around safety:

- Recent vandalism and trespass issues for those immediately surrounding site, including graffiti on the building at 1031 Omanawa Road.
- Why have a helicopter pad if it is safe access?

- What are we proposing to help people get back up the track if they get into difficulty?

Cost

Concerns about cost has been raised by a few people in terms of the costs carried by the ratepayers:

- Cost of project seems extremely high, have other options been investigated?
- Will our project cause a rates increase?
- Ratepayers already pay for a lot of park amenity this is no different
- This project is a waste of money, it's not going to stop people doing what they want - accessing areas they shouldn't be, crossing private land, swimming etc.
- Council should not be paying for this project. The land should be leased to a tourism company who can make the necessary investment

Ownership

Many in the room wanted to understand whether Council was going to “spend ratepayers money and give the land away”

Communication and engagement

Many in the room were disappointed that Council had not done better at communication and engagement with the community:

- TCC had not engaged adequately with the community and there were concerns whether there was any point in engaging if the project was going to go ahead without any changes (i.e. it was a fait accompli)
- Disappointed at lack of communication and transparency from TCC when they purchased the property
- Request for better communication between project and residents. The recent newsletter was a good start.

There were also some suggestions for how communication and engagement could be improved:

- Suggestion that there could be a resident's representative on the project team
- Some suggested a Residents Reference Group made up of a few people with opposing positions – this could work as many of the residents are retired.
- Suggested that the community are engaged via KORRA.

Other

There were a few other suggestions, concerns and questions that don't sit neatly within any of the above subject areas:

- Will TCC be renewing the lease with the power station when it was up renewal?
- Are we providing picnic areas?
- Concern regarding TCC reputation for project delivery

- Could consider alternate route for access (via Sarona Park Drive located further up Omanawa Road)
- Request that locals be given opportunities to participate in construction and/or maintenance of the project, including pest management, building fences, planting etc
- Who is paying for the café?
- Are toilets needed at the bottom?

Next Steps

The Governance Group will consider feedback received from the community, including concerns and questions raised, and evaluate whether the resource consent application needs to be revised. Responses to questions, concerns, suggestions, as well as information about the resource consent will be shared with the community in the next few weeks.