

Wellington's Golden Mile can be enhanced without banning cars

By Charles Finny
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Sir Bob Jones and others have recently floated the idea of banning cars from the Golden Mile and creating an extended pedestrian mall. It is something that seems to be finding increased support from many in the city council. Some people have even extended the idea of a ban to the wider CBD.

I agree with Sir Bob in that the best cities in the world are those that are alive with people going about their business. Wellington's high pedestrian count and walkability is responsible for much of the city's vibrancy and is what distinguishes it from other New Zealand cities. It increases our appeal and makes doing business here more pleasant. But as attractive as it might sound, the banning of vehicles from the entire Golden Mile (let alone the CBD as a whole) has to be given very careful thought.

The stretch from Lambton Quay to Courtenay Place is such a significant proportion of the CBD that banning vehicles from the whole area could be overkill. It might put pressure on the remaining, already-congested streets. It might also severely limit manoeuvrability about the city given that the adjoining streets would become cul de sacs (Johnson, Panama etc). Goods deliveries and the ability to pick-up and drop-off passengers would be lost and safety at night could be compromised without regular vehicle movement.

The widening of footpaths and the introduction of judder bars in some parts of the Golden Mile have already achieved a reduced vehicle count. As a thoroughfare it is now quicker to use the alternative routes and so people generally only use the Golden Mile if that (or the neighbouring streets) is their destination. Is it really necessary to take the next step and ban vehicle access outright? Improving the surrounding roads and widening the motorway to discourage transiting vehicles from travelling through the CBD might be a far better solution.

I share Sir Bob's desire for a good-looking, vibrant city with lots of public spaces. I also admire the European-style cities that Wellington is beginning to resemble and that our relatively compact nature tends us towards. But I am not convinced we yet have a sufficiently large population density, which typifies European cities, to sustain the vitality of a pedestrian road as long and large as the Golden Mile. The last thing we want is a dead zone.

Parts of the Golden Mile are so wide that it might not be a good look. Too large a pedestrian area might also dilute the appeal of the existing public spaces we already have. (Even Barcelona's Las Ramblas and Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse might lose their appeal if neighbouring streets were pedestrianised.)

There is plenty of scope to beautify the city and increase public spaces without pedestrianising the Golden Mile and adding to existing congestion. I think the council has done some good things in this regard in recent years. The proposal to extend Cuba Mall as a "shared space", the creation of Civic Square and the waterfront developments are cases in point. There is also potential to plant more trees, create more sculptures and fountains and introduce public squares and wider footpaths (where roads are sufficiently wide). These proposals are far more sensible than banning cars.

Sir Bob is also quoted as favouring continuous, free trams (or light rail) along the Golden Mile. I agree that this would look fantastic but while it would be a great tourist attraction, as a passenger transport system I have concerns about its practicality and economic viability. I am yet to be convinced that the very high cost of light rail can be justified given the size and density of the population. Moreover, unless the trams continued up the narrow winding Wellington streets, suburban passengers would have to get off and jump onto buses at either end of the CBD. A recent council study concluded that only one public transport mode is feasible.

Buses are often denigrated as an inferior mode of public transport but as technology progresses and buses modernise and become smaller and less obtrusive, there is increasingly less to distinguish them from light rail other than that they travel on rubber as opposed to metal wheels. Modern buses running along the Golden Mile "public transport spine" could look just as good. We already enjoy a hugely improved bus service as a result of the investments made by New Zealand Bus. We can expect continuing improvements.

The issue is all about balance. The city has to look good but it also has to function properly and it needs to facilitate economic growth. Wellington's compact nature means that scarce road space needs to be used wisely thus limiting the scope for car-less roads. It is not only important for Wellington city - the CBD is in a narrow isthmus through which traffic must flow to connect the port and airport from the rest of the North Island. An efficient transport system is essential.

Fewer vehicles in the CBD and a reduced reliance on cars would be a welcome development but banning them altogether could be a retrograde step. I applaud Sir Bob's forward thinking but think much more work needs to be done to justify his case. It could well be that a more balanced approach which protects Wellington's accessibility for all might deliver an even better result.

These views are my personal views and not necessarily those of the Chamber.