



GREAT LAKE TAUPŌ

Taupō District Council

Team:
HŌT
RŌCKS

YouTube video link: <https://youtu.be/YQ1IGWyG0o>

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SUMMARY REPORT

AUSTRALASIAN MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE 2017 PRE-CHALLENGE TASK OTUMUHEKE STREAM UPGRADE PROJECT – USER FEEDBACK

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To: Gareth Green – Chief Executive

INTRODUCTION

The Pre-Challenge task for the Taupō District Council (TDC) Australasian Management Challenge 2017 team was to identify a service, project or issue from which council would benefit from community feedback. The team was then to engage the community and report back on the findings. The upgrade of the Otumuheke Stream hot springs at Spa Thermal Park was identified as the most suitable project for this challenge.

Issue

The popularity of this free attraction has led to it being overwhelmed by the number of visitors it receives. This has led to a degradation of the environment and reduction in user experience quality.

BACKGROUND

The challenge team, through internal discussions and consultation with mentors came up with a list of possible issues, identifying the Otumuheke Stream as our preferred issue for the challenge. The team met with the Senior Leadership Group to discuss the options and present our rationale for identifying our preferred option. It was agreed that this was a good project to use to achieve the goals of the challenge which would also benefit TDC and the project; and approval was given to move forward with the challenge process.

The Otumuheke Stream upgrade project

Otumuheke Stream at Spa Park is a popular destination for tourists and locals and is one of the most readily identifiable free attractions in Taupō. The area however is identified as a problem area for Council, Police and local iwi. Up to 1500 people per day can use or traverse the area which could generously be described as the size of a small residential section at approximately 700m² of usable space; with about 55m² being hot spring pools, and about 200m² of safe stream mouth before joining the strong flow of the Waikato River.

This existing project is considered to be positive, with few anticipated negatives. It encompasses a number of issues relevant to local government in general, and Taupō in particular, including:

- Local iwi partnership with Council
- Balancing tourist/community interests
- Promoting the district
- Accountability for third party funding
- Ecological benefits balanced with amenity and tourism opportunities
- Riverbank erosion
- Cross agency project (Patuiwi – local hapu, Taupō District Council, Department of Conservation and Waikato Regional Council)

The area at times can be somewhat unsafe and unclean. This is due to a number of factors:

- Intense usage
- Culture/type of users
- Poor design and site legibility
- Lack of oversight/visibility
- Unsuitable promotion
- Lack of suitable facilities
- Lack of awareness of the historical and cultural significance of the site to local iwi

These factors have led to degradation of the area by the users resulting in:

- Anti-social behaviour
- Ecological damage
- Public drunkenness and abuse
- Riverbank erosion
- Severe littering (including broken glass from bottles in the surrounds and river)
- Public defecation
- Crime (mostly theft)

While we are aware of the negative issues associated with the area, and it is clear that steps have to be taken to address them; less work has been done assessing the user experience and what some of the perceptions of the transitory tourists are. Observational investigations have been done previously, but it is hoped that this user-engagement feedback will highlight some of the user experiences and perceptions. This led us to on-site, user interviews to gather additional information.

Process

In order to fulfil the requirements of the task, and to get the best possible feedback, the team conducted in-person interviews with Otumuheke Stream users on-site over a number of days. We also engaged with external agency representatives with an interest in the area, interviewing them on-site. The external agency parties provided information on the site and issues from their perspective. This is helpful in assessing the site as their views provide insight into dealing with issues which are outside of Council's typical core business and experience.

All of the interviews were recorded, and were edited together to create a 5 minute presentation video outlining the issues, feedback and possible actions. This video is available separately at:

https://youtu.be/_YQ1IGWyG0o

In order to encourage participation, we chose to go on-site in a relatively informal manner, and offered vouchers to Council's AC Baths to people who chose to talk with us. The people we interviewed came from a range of backgrounds. Although most were young overseas tourists, there were a few locals who were visiting the site that we were able to get feedback from.

The people we talked to from external agencies were:

- Matiu Heperi-Northcroft *Patuiwi Trust*
- Steve Kittle *NZ Police*
- Nicky Hughes *Waikato Regional Council*
- Roger Nelson *Pumicelands Rural Fire*

While the tone of the interviews was relatively informal, there were four basic questions that we tried to get feedback on which we thought would be useful for ongoing development and management.

- How did you find out about the area/why did you decide to visit?
- Is it what you expected?
- What do you like about the area?
- Is there anything that you don't like, or would like to see that would improve the area?

Limitations

There seemed to be few local residents present during the times that interviews were conducted. The timing of the interviews during normal working hours could have had a bearing on this; as it may be more likely that locals visit the site on weekends and after work.

It is recognised that the worst behaviour happens in the evenings after the park has been closed. While the gates are locked overnight, it is not possible to prevent people from walking through the park to access the springs. It was not feasible to try and obtain interviews with users after hours.

The nature of the engagement dictated that the number of participants and the amount of information we were able to collect was limited.

Feedback

The feedback was largely positive, with all of the visitors saying that they would visit the area again (and a number had already visited previously).

There were a few different responses to the reason for visiting, with the main answers being:

- Online discovery – web portal or app
- Accommodation recommendation
- Friend recommendation
- Local knowledge

There was a spectrum of answers, with no real consistency of expectations; apart from that with the knowledge that it was free, expectations were already relatively low. Some people expected basic facilities, others thought it was too small and others felt the intimate setting to be just right.

Nearly every person responded that they liked the natural setting, and the fact that it was free. There seemed to be a general feeling that too much development would detract from the best part of what makes the springs attractive. This was also coupled with a fear that development would increase visitor numbers and may attract a fee to use the site. Previous Council reports and Google Analytics information indicate that the site can be visited by up to 1500 people per day though, so at peak times it is already extremely busy.

There weren't a lot of things that people could think of to improve the area apart from basic facilities for changing and toilets.

The more targeted feedback came from agency people, who tended to have specific and longer-term interactions with the site. These concerns would not be readily apparent to most casual visitors, which made it important to get a range of feedback from a variety of parties with different site perspectives. The Rural Fire and Police highlighted security as their main concern. Waikato Regional Council was concerned about the ecological integrity of the site and the continued protection of the rare geothermal vegetation which is present up the Otumuheke Stream. The Patuiwi Trust Chair had a wide view of the site, based on the ideals of Kaitiakitanga, which is guardianship of the site. The overarching respect, safety and health of the areas environment, people and history covered most aspects of concern.

Discussion

It is clear that most visitors are unaware of many of the concerns which are held by agencies with an interest in the site. While on one hand it is encouraging that the negative aspects are not readily apparent to casual visitors, it also points to a lack of prior knowledge and education about the site. This is a concern as people do not appear to be taking their personal security very seriously, have no understanding of the fragility and importance of the ecology around the area, including water quality, vegetation protection and erosion control, and have no idea of the cultural significance of the site to the local hapu, Patuiwi.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The indications from the feedback seemed to indicate that the basic principles and direction of the current proposed project are generally in line with visitor expectations of the site.

1. Facilities:

Basic facilities would be a welcome addition:

- Changing rooms
- Toilets
- Lockers
- Interpretive and warning signage

2. Design:

There is a fine balance to be navigated in integrating design interventions to improve the area without taking away the "natural" feel that the visitors enjoy. All improvements should be done with sensitive integration of design into the site. Integrated design cues which incorporate elements of the Patuiwi culture would be helpful to enhance the feeling of cultural importance; creating a sense of place history and cultural values. Improvement should utilise design elements which encourage respect of the site in a subtle way.

3. Vegetation:

Ecological and amenity planting improvements could be made which would retain and enhance the natural feel of the area. These changes might not be immediately apparent to the majority of visitors who might be unfamiliar with native vegetation; but would achieve biodiversity goals and enhance the user experience.

4. Personal Security:

Increasing the active and passive aspects of personal security would be beneficial:

- Supporting a "capable guardian" (an unofficial presence on site with a vested interest)
- Improving descriptive information on online portals and to local accommodation providers

Otumuheke Stream is a real drawcard for the township and Spa Park, and enhanced management of the area will lead to a number of direct and indirect benefits for stakeholders and the community.