

## Disneyland tourism has no place in Fiordland

By Bill Jarvie

The Fiordland Link Experience public relations offensive continues. Bob Robertson of Riverstone Holdings, is playing it straight out of the book – ‘When floating a highly controversial project, with questionable economics, employ one of the following tactics:

- a) Endeavour to lift support by inflating the opportunities.
- b) Overstate the level of “support” for the project.
- c) Promise the community shared wealth, even if such is contentious.
- d) Dazzle the audience/public with big numbers and promises of “jobs and money”.
- e) Portray any detractors as marginal and/or fringe.
- f) If desperate, all of the above.’

Recent articles by Mr Robertson are so contrived they are offensive to many thousands of Kiwis against the project, not to mention the intelligence of most readers.

Despite trying to trivialise the opposition as “a small minority”, Mr Robertson knows full-well his project is hugely unpopular and controversial, not just in the affected regions but nationally. For his information, to date there are in excess of 20,000 who have signed petitions against his destructive Fiordland Link project. Of course he doesn’t want to delve into the reasons for the groundswell of disapproval but for the sake of balancing the argument let’s spell it out.

For a start, the proposal – with a fantastical array of high-speed catamarans, all-terrain buses, monorails – sounds like something dreamt up by a devotee of Muldoon-esque ‘Think Big’ doctrine, and big boys’ toys. Mr Robertson claims tourists have “no interest in losing their precious time sitting in buses”; one wonders how much patience they will have when continually waiting in line and being herded on and off the plethora of vehicles he plans for his venture. And then find their ordeal has taken as long as existing options.

The fact that the NZ tourism industry does not support the proposal speaks volumes.

The level of investment that will be required for the vehicle fleet – and the infrastructural support – to cater to the inflated patronage projections will be quite staggering. Does Mr Robertson have the funds personally or will he be looking for backing? If he can’t finance it himself, will he be calling on his Chinese business associates to bankroll him?

The latter raises some serious issues around New Zealand sovereignty, particularly in light of the fact that Mr Robertson’s Fiordland Link relies on the Government gifting him a sizeable chunk of public Conservation land so he can plough his monorail route through World Heritage forest, wetlands and rivers to his exclusive hotel site. It’s galling enough that the Government is even considering carving off a vast chunk of New Zealand’s natural heritage for an individual’s private pecuniary gain; what will the public make of it being given to off-shore investors? One thing is for certain, the backlash will make the opposition to National’s asset sales look like a side-show by comparison.

In terms of the proposed route for the Fiordland Link, this has been equally poorly conceived. The Mount Nicholas/Mavora Lakes road is suited only to low traffic volumes; it is not an all-weather

road, especially for buses, and is frighteningly steep at Von River gorge. The small numbers of tourist buses that have previously attempted to ply a trade through this arduous route have been plagued by mechanical issues.

Further, with around 15km of this road at between 600 - 700 metres above sea level, winter snow up to 1m-deep commonly causes closure. And then there are at least two rivers that must be crossed, one of which is certainly impassable following heavy rain. Mr Robertson has made no mention of who will have to foot the bill for the extremely costly upgrade and servicing of the road required to turn his dream into reality and cater for the extra traffic demands. So, again the rosy picture he paints of his scheme ignores the real downsides such as the financial burden that would inevitably befall ratepayers and taxpayers that struggle to service Southland's current gravel road network!

What is only now been exposed though, is the bungle that has the Fiordland Link clashing with Prime Minister and Tourism Minister John Key's national cycle trail. According to Mr Robertson's projections, there will be convoys of 40-seater buses in both directions to service the monorail leg of the trip. That's right, pedal bikers on the Around the Mountain Cycleway will have the pleasure of sharing the road with dust-kicking, diesel-belching 4WD coaches – What an idyllic experience for cyclists to go home and rave about!

Certainly there are safety issues on this narrow and windy shared road to consider. But what about the significant environmental impacts? Cutting two parallel swathes, tens of metres wide through over 20km of the Snowdon beech forest to pave the way for the monorail and permanent construction/maintenance road (which Bob prefers to avoid mentioning). This ancient beech forest is home to New Zealand's only native land mammal, our nationally critically endangered long-tailed bat, that DOC is charged with protecting from extinction. How could anyone honestly claim they could mitigate such destruction?

As for Mr Robertson's assertion that "very real" opportunities exist for the regional economy, the only reality is that his pie-in-the-sky proposal will be in direct conflict with the numerous existing tourism operations which are low impact and sustainable in this fragile part of New Zealand.

Therein lies the biggest flaw with this Mickey Mouse plan: international visitors don't come to this country for a Disneyland experience they can get anywhere else in the world, rather it's our unique point of difference – an unsullied, undeveloped pristine natural areas – for which they are willing to pay a premium and travel so far. Tourism research shows our top six tourist markets associate this country with a clean and unpolluted environment, unfettered natural scenery and outdoor activities. Monorails and assorted joy-rides run completely contrary to what they want and expect.

Forcing this obscene development through some of our most iconic scenic areas is not going to "get tourism back on track", as claimed. It will only derail our pure tourism advantage.

- Bill Jarvie is a Te Anau resident of 31 years and Chairman of Save Fiordland.
- Contact phone: 021 540 821
- Email: bill.linda@xtra.co.nz