

19 April 2024

Submission to the **Environment Committee** on the ***Fast-track Approvals Bill***.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland raises awareness by advocating and promoting Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on social justice issues on behalf of the Catholic Bishop, Catholic Diocese of Auckland.

We, the Commission, strongly oppose the Fast-track Approvals Bill as we believe this Bill has the adverse and detrimental probability of jeopardising our environment, impacting the health and wellbeing of our society, overriding existing legislation, and excluding iwi, local Councils and communities from governance and decision-making processes that will directly affect their livelihoods, whenua, and regions.

We believe the potential risks associated with this Bill far outweigh any potential advantages. The focus of our submission and the basis of our opposition to the Bill align with the CST principles that advocate for Care for Creation, Stewardship, Human Dignity, Common Good, Subsidiarity and Solidarity.

We firmly believe that communities should actively participate in decisions that directly impact their well-being.

Disregarding Democracy

- **Iwi Inclusion:** We advocate for iwi to play a more significant, direct, inclusive, and decisive role in decision-making regarding projects that directly impact their land, water, and other natural Taonga guaranteed under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi). The Bill's current approach to upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi is insufficient at best and tokenism at worst. We urge a comprehensive commitment to honouring and upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi values and principles.
- **Community Exclusion:** The Bill currently excludes communities from influencing decisions that shape their future. We advocate for a more inclusive approach, aligning with the principle of **subsidiarity** – mana whakahaere – which emphasise decision-making at the local level. Every segment of society possesses unique insights, and encouraging this participation (nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou) is essential.
- **Local Input:** We strongly support granting local communities and Councils substantial freedoms in making decisions that affect their land, livelihoods, and social conditions. As those most directly impacted by consent decisions, they

should have a direct voice rather than relying solely on the final judgement and rulings of distant politicians.

- **Limited Public Consultation:** The Bill restricts public consultation by allowing ministers and expert panels to preselect which voices they hear. This approach is unfair and risks excluding critical perspectives, diverse expertise, and opposing views.
- **Centralised Decision-Making:** The Bill concentrates decision-making power in the hands of a select group of politicians in Wellington. The Ministers of Transport, Infrastructure, and Regional Development have the final say in approving projects, without the possibility of appealing their decisions based on merit. This lack of scrutiny and balance can lead to overruling expert panel recommendations.
- **Imbalanced Prioritisation:** The Bill explicitly instructs decision-makers to prioritise a process that expedites infrastructure and development projects with ‘significant regional or national benefits.’ However, it fails to adequately address environmental and social risks. Ignoring these risks is irresponsible, especially when promoting development that may have adverse and irreversible consequences.
- **Ministerial Exclusion:** The Bill’s exclusion of the Minister for the Environment and the Minister of Climate Change from this decision-making process is alarming. These decisions hold significant importance for their portfolios, and their input should be included.

Environmental and Climate Change Risks

- **Dependence on the Environment:** Our economy, society, health, primary industries, and cultural values all rely on a healthy environment. Therefore, we must apply the precautionary principle when making decisions that could significantly and detrimentally impact our natural surroundings.
- **Common Good:** When making ‘decisions of regional or national significance’, we should adhere to the principle of the **common good** (he painga mā te katoa). This involves considering the rights and responsibilities of all individuals, as well as evaluating the long-term social, cultural, environmental, and economic impacts.

Our duty of **stewardship** (kaitiakitanga) compels us to sustain our natural environment for the benefit of future generations. The Fast-track Approvals Bill disregards these essential principles, potentially leading to decisions that harm both society and the environment.

- **Centralised Decision-Making Risks:** Concentrating decision-making power over complex resource management decisions made by a few central government politicians introduces risks. This process becomes susceptible to lobbying, politicisation, and errors of judgment. New Zealand’s robust environmental protection regime was designed to prevent such pitfalls. Cabinet Ministers lack direct connections to local communities and experts who understand the social and environmental impacts of these crucial decisions.

Making an example:

For us in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland, we believe the Fast-track Approvals Bill would be detrimental to future projects such as **Auckland Rapid Transit Pathway (ARTP)** - Auckland Transport’s blueprint for the development of rapid transit in Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland over the next 30 years. In the list of concerns highlighted throughout this submission, should the Bill be passed, our concerns for future projects similar to ARTP under a ‘fast-track approval’ method would see reduced scrutiny, limited public involvement (the previous Auckland Light Rail Project had 60% public support before being disestablished by the current government), no consultation from mana whenua iwi, no consultation from international experts or collaboration, decision-making would be overly centralised and restricted with no input or consultation from the Ministers of Climate Change, Environment or Housing. Without balance and appropriate consultation an absolute imbalance between development and environmental protection would ensue. As a knock-on effect major projects and our long-term well-being will be jeopardised.

Conclusion:

The Bill by its own definition and method is impatience personified and embodied. Democracy, including sufficient consultancy periods with the public and local communities, should not be rushed. History proves, time and again, that patience is indeed a virtue.

We, as a Commission, advocate not only for our interests, but the interests of others (Phil 2:4) with the understanding and wisdom derived from CST:

“Technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress. Frequently, in fact, people’s quality of life actually diminishes – by the deterioration of the environment, the low quality of food or the depletion of resources – in the midst of economic growth.”

– Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 2015

It is clear this Bill’s aim is at odds with Aotearoa, New Zealand’s best interests. Please take the necessary time to consider our future, and the future of this land for generations

to come. With slow and steady productive progress, we can all ‘win this race’ toward a better future.

I runga i te tika me te rangimarie | In justice and peace,

The Justice and Peace Commission, Catholic Diocese of Auckland.