

Media Release – 23rd January, 2012

GLENORCHY COMMUNITY VOICES OPPOSITION TO TUNNEL

The Glenorchy community gave a very clear indication of their opposition to the Milford Dart tunnel proposal at a Glenorchy Community Association meeting held on Saturday 21st January, when a vote produced a 100 to 0 result in opposition to the proposed tunnel project. The massive turnout included a wide spread of age groups and was an unprecedented response by the Glenorchy community to what is perceived as a threat to the values of the district's residents and ratepayers.

Plans to build an 11.3km tunnel from the Routeburn Valley to the Hollyford Valley by Milford Dart Limited (MDL) will be the longest New Zealand road tunnel – 9km longer than any road tunnel currently in New Zealand. The tunnel entrance will be near the Routeburn shelter and will require a 150m road to be constructed to access the portal on the Glenorchy side, penetrating a new road into Mount Aspiring National Park and delving into a seismically sensitive area. Massive quantities of spoil will need to be safely disposed of and 8,500m² of natural vegetation will be decimated at the Hollyford end of the tunnel.

Concerns were raised by the community that the Routeburn Road will have to be widened to accommodate two buses and a new power supply to the tunnel, with all power supplied from the Glenorchy end after construction. 468m of tunnel will be excavated from the Glenorchy end with 25,000 cubic metres of fill to be disposed of outside the national park at night to an undisclosed location.

“We have a really compelling story to tell and we have so much to lose if the tunnel goes ahead” says sub-committee member Leslie Van Gelder. “At the very least we can say we did what we could to raise awareness of the facts surrounding the building of the tunnel and the on-going effects on our community” she said.

Despite MDL stating that an intended outcome of their vision is a construction project which is “open and engaged with local communities,” they have made no contact with the community of Glenorchy to have a public information session for over six years. The description of the tunnel and the plans have changed dramatically since then with no information to the community from the company.

The community was united in its opposition to this proposal. Concern was expressed that although the existing road is *within* the National Park, the implications of this upgrade were not considered a ‘matter of relevance’ according to the DoC officer’s report to the Minister of Conservation, and therefore not commented on because the road is currently maintained by QLDC. The Minister of Conservation is in fact flying in the face of two National Park Management Plans and the advice of Conservation Boards, who exist to give voice to community feeling on DoC management issues.

Mark Hasselman of Glenorchy said “In my 35 years in Glenorchy I haven’t ever seen before such a united sense of purpose at a community meeting.” Fifth generation Glenorchy resident Ronda Gollop commented that “in recent years the community has grown, with people seeking out the type of community that can only exist at the end of the road. It’s not

about us, it's about our grandchildren – for 150 years people have come here seeking peace and tranquility. Glenorchy has a strong sense of place, and many people find a very spiritual connection to the landscape of our valley.”

The community felt that there are very real threats to the ecological values of the area from this development that will lead to a significant deterioration of the visitor experience of the National Park. It is identified as habitat for mohua, pekapeka (bats), kea, rock wren, falcon, kakariki, whio (blue duck) and South Island robin. Bats are New Zealand's only endemic mammals, and community members have made a large volunteer contribution towards monitoring their numbers over the years. Thousands of taxpayer dollars have been invested in the mohua population, and it seems that DoC are treating this huge local investment lightly in their response to the tunnel proposal.

The Routeburn track is walked by 16,300 guided and independent walkers each year, and up to 14,850 day walkers visit the road end annually. If the project goes ahead, walkers will be visually assaulted by construction work at the Hollyford airstrip and endure the noise impact of construction work at both ends of the tunnel. The whole Mount Aspiring National Park Plan is built on the concept of “natural quiet” – Glenorchy residents feel that the MANP is being compromised for the sake of a result in the neighbouring Fiordland National Park. The whole tunnel concept focuses not on visitor experience, but on the outmoded “bums on seats” model which the tourist industry is trying to shift away from on many levels.

One of the most compelling issues raised at the meeting was concern for maintaining the World Heritage Site status for The Fiordland National Park and Mt Aspiring National Park, one of only 400 sites world wide. Whilst UNESCO cannot protect the site, it places a moral obligation on the New Zealand Government and New Zealanders to protect and preserve this heritage.

Before the MDL tunnel can proceed they require a concession agreement from the Department of Conservation along with the appropriate resource consents from local authorities. DOC has extended the deadline for submitting on the proposed Milford Dart Tunnel due to the high level of public interest.

The deadline for submissions has been extended to Monday 20th February 2012, which allows more time to understand the complexity of issues surrounding the proposed tunnel.

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