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TEL Announcement

## Tolls bring Tauranga's link road 7 years closer

By [Michael Dickison](#)

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**Celebrating the next step towards the proposed Eastern Link in 2009. From left MP for Tauranga Simon Bridges, Western Bay Mayor Ross Paterson and Minister of Transport Steven Joyce. Photo / APN**

One of New Zealand's biggest roading projects has been brought forward seven years by a plan to charge tolls.

Transport Minister Steven Joyce announced that construction of the estimated \$455 million Tauranga Eastern Link would begin early next year after the Cabinet agreed to allow tolls of up to \$5 on the 23km bypass.

The road, one of seven "roads of national significance", would save motorists 12 minutes one-way - a capital cost of about \$38 million a minute of travel time saved.

The road's length - about the distance between central Auckland and Manukau - is on sinking peat that will need to be raised by landfill almost as high as a two-storey building. Enough fill to completely fill Eden Park will be required.

Seven bridges, including a 150m four-lane bridge over the Kaituna River, will be built and 300,000 native plants planted.

Mr Joyce said the toll road was expected to earn about \$130 million in 35 years, making up for the cost of 185m of road - less than seven seconds of driving - in a year.

"It reflects all the development happening in eastern Tauranga and Papamoa. With a city the size of Nelson [projected to be] added to Tauranga, this is about developments 10 years down the track." .

Mr Joyce trumpeted the economic benefits of the road, saying it would improve access to New Zealand's biggest export port and create jobs during its construction.

It is expected to open in 2016.

Tolls on the Government's other roading projects would be considered case by case - and were likely on State Highway 1 from Puhoi to Wellsford and on Wellington's Transmission Gully road, he said.

New Zealand Transport Agency regional director Harry Wilson said that initially the toll road would evenly split 25,000 vehicles a day with the existing highway.

The agency would consider the toll road a success if most trucks came to use it, Mr Wilson said.

The free alternative, State Highway 2 through Te Puke, is New Zealand's second-most-dangerous road per kilometre.

That road will be slowed down once Tauranga Eastern Link is built, improving road safety.

But Tauranga's other toll road, a 5km bypass of its CBD, has again lost millions of dollars and its revenue and daily use have declined for the second year in a row.

Route K, a waterfront road that bypasses much of the city for motorists driving in from Auckland, was built in 2003 with the hope that it would eventually pay for itself.

It is yet to make a profit, and losses have grown since 2006 while vehicle numbers remain only half initial estimates.

Provisional figures from the Tauranga City Council show the road lost \$2.6 million in 2009/10 - one-third more than its smallest loss in 2005/06.

Tauranga councillor Bill Grainger said Route K was a white elephant and an "embarrassment" to the city.

"It's not used too often at all, and the times I went on it, it's been awful to see a \$41 million project struggling to get vehicles," Mr Grainger said.

More cars and trucks have been using the road since December, particularly after improvements to Route K's link to Tauranga's harbour bridge.

Last month, the number of vehicles on Route K reached record levels, up 14 per cent from a year before, with more than 5000 a day.

Still, daily use averaged about 3200 vehicles for the year - much less than an initial forecast of 10,000.

It has been estimated that four out of five cars and three of four trucks take the long way around and avoid the toll.

But council chief executive Stephen Town said he remained hopeful Route K would become profitable in four to seven years, and pay for itself by 2044.

By [Michael Dickison](#) | [Email Michael](#)