

Before an Independent Hearing Commissioner at Hurunui District Council

under: the Resource Management Act 1991

in the matter of: application RC210098 for land use consent to install
and operate a Gravity-Based Recreation Activity within
the Conical Hill Reserve, Hanmer Springs

between: **Hanmer Springs Thermal Pools & Spa**
Applicant

and: **Hurunui District Council**
Consent Authority

Summary of evidence of Graeme Abbot

Dated: 7 October 2021

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SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE OF GRAEME ABBOT

INTRODUCTION

- 1 My name is Graeme Abbot and I am the General Manager of Hanmer Springs Thermal Pools & Spa (*HSTPS*).
- 2 During my 21 years at HSTPS I have overseen a substantial amount of development work. We are experienced in both operating a world-class tourist attraction, and in administering a reserve in accordance with a Reserve Management Plan.
- 3 HSTPS prides itself on the unique identity and reputation as a high quality tourist destination we have established over the years. We are the largest employer in the Hurunui District and over 500,000 people visit our complex each year.
- 4 HSTPS hosts a large number of schools. We also proudly sponsor various sporting groups, and support all of the larger events in the village.
- 5 COVID-19 has changed the tourism landscape of New Zealand. I firmly believe that in the new COVID-19 landscape it is critical for tourism destinations such as Hanmer Springs to expand and improve their activity offering in order to remain competitive.

THE FLYRIDE PROPOSAL

- 6 Back in mid-2019 HSTPS applied for funding from the Provincial Growth Fund. We made the application with a view to grow the range of recreation attractions in Hanmer Springs. The Flyride is strategically located on Conical Hill, nearby the popular thermal pools complex and within walking distance from the village.
- 7 Apart from the large pull of the Thermal Pools there is a limited range of paid activities in Hanmer Springs when you consider over 500,000 people visit the town each year. We envisaged that a new tourist venture in town would attract new visitors into the village as well as increase the length of time that visitors stay. With the launch of Conical Thrill and the new Cascade Pools in 2019 we have shown that a new development attracts growth in visitor numbers.
- 8 Our application for funding was successful and in August 2020 Hurunui District Council was granted \$2.2million to construct a downhill amusement ride on Conical Hill.
- 9 Shortly after the government announced the funding we undertook a procurement process and Christchurch-based engineering consultancy firm Holmes Solutions was selected to design, supply and install the ride. The Switchback™ technology used in the Flyride

proposal was previously developed by Holmes Solutions for a ride in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

- 10 Our mission is to provide a safe, fun, accessible and environmentally friendly experience for all people. Our fundamental sympathy for the natural world is right at the heart of the proposal and every decision we make in relation to it. Solar power will be the only power source on the hill, and the ride has been designed to blend in with the natural environment. Our carbon footprint will be assessed by Toitū Envirocare: we are striving for the Flyride to be carbon zero.
- 11 HSTPS is committed to improving the general condition of Conical Hill, including through native vegetation planting. In addition, we have engaged Dr Mandy Tocher to develop a lizard management plan. As part of our plan to manage and enhance lizard populations, we will undertake pest management that should also benefit birdlife on the hill, such as the New Zealand falcon.
- 12 We are well underway in the process of obtaining a Wildlife Act Authority from the Department of Conservation. HSTPS have sought to keep the lizard management plan out of the public domain. This is purely because there is a real risk of lizard collectors finding out the location of our proposed lizard habitat, and poaching the lizards. Lizard poaching is, unfortunately, a real danger to already fragile lizard populations in New Zealand. Again, the environment is, and will continue to be, at the forefront of every decision we make in this project.

CONSULTATION

- 13 For the last decade HSTPS has chosen to publicly notify any significant works it undertakes. The same philosophy applied to this application and from an early stage we actively and widely consulted with members of the community on the proposal so as to assist them to understand our project and our objectives and, additionally, to update them on technical work underway. Consultation also sought to obtain constructive feedback that was incorporated into the proposal and conditions of consent.
- 14 In response to feedback received, HSTPS made a number of refinements to the proposal. The most significant changes were:
 - 14.1 changing the proposed route to come down the west side of the hill so that it would not interact with the existing main walking track. This also reduced the potential for noise effects for neighbouring households; and
 - 14.2 selecting a supplier who used steel support towers rather than trees as part of the course.

- 15 Feedback received in response to these changes was very positive.
- 16 We also engaged a number of specialists, who you will hear from today, to assess potential effects of the proposal on the environment. Their input was incorporated in our application as well as the proposed conditions of consent.
- 17 HSTPS believes that by listening to and understanding the views of the local community and seeking expert advice we have developed a proposal that will boost the tourism sector and the economy, create employment opportunities, bring national and international attention to Hanmer Springs, and become a “must-do” attraction for both regular and new visitors to the village. At the same time, we have worked hard and followed advice to ensure effects arising from the Flyride will not adversely impact the well-being of the surrounding community and environment.

RESPONSES TO MATTERS RAISED IN SUBMITTER EVIDENCE

- 18 I have read and considered the evidence provided by the Friends of Conical Hill. While I acknowledge that I am not a traffic expert, I have some comments I would like to make to Mr Raymond Edwards’ evidence.
- 19 As a preliminary matter, I note that there is a track counter at the start of the Conical Hill walkway which is monitored by the Department of Conservation. In 2019-2020 this counted over 50,000 people visiting Conical Hill with no congestion for parking apparent. In my view, this must be a strong indicator of the level of parking available in the area, as well as visitor’s typical parking behaviour.

Number of staff

- 20 At paragraph 15 Mr Edwards seems to imply that there is a discrepancy between the application document and traffic evidence which says there will be two to four staff onsite, and comments I made to the media earlier in the year that the proposal will create up to 25 jobs.
- 21 We have undertaken modelling which shows that when the Flyride is operating at maximum capacity over the peak holiday times we will need 23 staff to run it. As the application states, there will be between two and four staff on site, and occasionally a manager may also be on site.¹ When the Flyride is operating between 10am and 6pm, staff are required from 8am to 7pm to allow for setup, ride safety checks, and lockup at the end of the day. This means that each week there is up to 77 hours that the Flyride needs to be staffed, and this will be achieved through different shifts. Modelling

¹ Paragraph 29 of the original resource consent application.

also requires allowances for holiday and sick leave. In addition to on-site staff, there will be sales and information staff working in the village. There will also be maintenance jobs; and maintenance will be done when the Flyride is not operating (meaning the usual on-site staff will not be on the hill at the time). As the Flyride will be open seven days a week we effectively need to 'double up' on the number of jobs so that everyone is able to have days off. To imply that there will be 25 staff on Conical Hill is inaccurate.

Typical visitor observations

- 22 At paragraph 32 and throughout his evidence Mr Edwards asserts that the traffic assessment is undermined because it is based on an assumption that drivers typically park in the township and then walk between a variety of sites.
- 23 In my view, this assertion is misguided. My general observation, through living and working in Hanmer Springs for over 21 years, is that visitors do park their cars and walk to various activities in the village. Most Saturdays HSTPS hosts approximately 2,500 customers. The vast majority walk from their accommodation to the thermal pools complex. This is despite there being a 92 park carpark only 400 metres from the entrance which always has carparks available.
- 24 In fact, I made a point of observing how people came to the pools last weekend as I was managing people coming to the pools under restricted entry. Consistent with my observations over the last 21 years, the majority walked rather than drove to the pools. Coincidentally, most came from the north – the direction of Conical Hill. This is where accommodation is most concentrated in Hanmer Springs. I cannot see any reason why this typical visitor behaviour of parking at accommodation and walking between various sites would suddenly change for the Flyride.
- 25 At paragraph 36 Mr Edward's makes a comment that "holiday home occupancy levels could have a noticeable effect on the on street parking demand levels within the residential area located at the base of Conical Hill". As I noted earlier, accommodation in Hanmer Springs is most concentrated at the base of Conical Hill. I suggest that it would be odd for those parked at their accommodation, already near the start of the walkway, to move their car onto the street when they already have a park set aside for them at their accommodation.
- 26 I also note that the second most popular walk in Hanmer Springs is the Sculpture walk, which has been particularly popular over the last year. There is parking available at the start of the Sculpture walk but, again, my observation is that the vast majority of people walk to the start from the village.

Annual trading data

- 27 Mr Edwards also suggests at paragraph 35 and throughout his evidence that the traffic assessment is undermined because no evidence was provided to substantiate that the thermal pools data used as a proxy to determine the busy-ness of the village at the time of the traffic assessment.
- 28 I confirm that we provided Simon de Verteuil with anticipated patronage data to use as a proxy in his traffic assessment. Anticipated data provided was based on 2018 visitation data. We now have visitation data for the period of August 2020 through to July 2021 and I can confirm that the patronage data during this period is as follows:
- 28.1 The average visitor number on a single day is 1,362.
- 28.2 The average visitor number on Saturdays is 2,464, compared to 3,158 on Saturday 24 April 2021.
- 28.3 The average visitor number on a 'normal' two day weekend is 4,110, compared to 6,771 visitors on 24 and 25 April 2021.
- 29 This means that on Saturday 24 April 2021 the number of visitors was 132% higher than a standard day, and across the weekend the visitation rate was 65% higher than the average weekend. In short, it was a very busy day for the thermal pools.

CONCLUSION

- 30 Our vision is to provide a world-class adventure activity in Hanmer Springs that will complement the iconic Conical hill.
- 31 I consider that HSTPS has undertaken a methodical and comprehensive approach to the development of the Flyride proposal and has utilised a wide variety of expertise.
- 32 In terms of public consultation, I consider we have consulted widely, early and often, and in good faith with interested parties. As issues have been identified, we have endeavoured to understand and resolve matters.
- 33 Thank you, I am happy to answer any questions the Commissioner may have.

Dated: 7 October 2021

Graeme Abbot