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Milford Opportunities Project: Masterplanning to realise an ambitious vision

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"Thanks Joan well done on all fronts, really appreciated."
Russell Alexander - Chief Executive at Hobbiton™ Movie Set

Milford Opportunities Project: Masterplanning to realise an ambitious vision

Tangata Whenua exercise mana whenua over their ancestral lands; however, with that comes responsibilities. We must remember that people are part of the environment, and like the environment must be provided for – in other words, manaakitanga. A huge amount of mahi has gone into understanding the needs of people and place.

Masterplan Foreword - Michael R Skerrett QSM, JP, Hon SIT Fellow, Kaumatua

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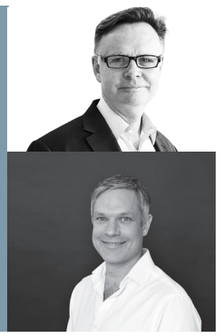

MASTERPLAN DEVELOPMENT: A STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

Milford Sound Piopiotahi had become "crowded, rushed, noisy and unsafe" as Dr Keith Turner, the Milford Opportunities Governance Group's chair, succinctly noted. Dig a little deeper and it becomes apparent that these immediate challenges were set in the context of piecemeal and incremental development creep over the longer term, much like the glaciers that originally formed this iconic landscape.

To address these shortcomings the Milford Opportunities Project (MOP) Masterplan was created. The Masterplan was developed from years of strategic planning and creative design practices to help shape the future of Milford Sound Piopiotahi. Developing this Masterplan required significant collaboration and consultation between numerous stakeholders to meet and exceed the diverse expectations, particularly around economic growth, recreation, tourism, environment, and conservation.

The Governance Group set an ambitious vision for the project – "*Piopiotahi – New Zealand as it was, forever.*"

For our Stantec and Boffa Miskell lead team, the impact of the February 2020 storm events and Covid-19 dramatically marked the formative stages of the Masterplan process. It sharpened a focus on the need for meaningful change. On top of working within tight time and budget constraints, our team faced significant challenges, respectfully navigating local engagement processes with a community experiencing enormous and abrupt changes.

It was not sufficient to simply "plaster over the cracks" to deliver on the Governance Group's Vision and the Seven Pillars but to take a more fundamental, systems-based approach. This approach meant considering the broader context of the Milford Corridor, all the way back to Te Anau, and reviewing how this extraordinary place is governed and managed.

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NGĀI TAHU: VITAL MASTERPLAN PARTNERS

A vital aspect of this transformation included strengthening the partnership with Ngāi Tahu as mana whenua/mana moana. Early and ongoing engagement with the kaitiaki Papatipu Rūnanga was critical. It reinforced to us that the cultural heritage of Ngāi Tahu is of fundamental importance to Te Rua o te Moko/Fiordland as is the Ngāi Tahu expression and exercise of tino rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga. The Masterplan became one means to acknowledge whakapapa, help re-establish the wairua (or spirit) of the place and recognise the Ara Tawhito (traditional trails) that had once connected the landscapes and people.

Bringing together Māori and Pakeha world views and diversifying the visitor experience formed the basis of a critical Masterplan action for the Stage 3 implementation. This action is investigating the (MOP Masterplan at 66):

> *Repositioning of the Milford Opportunities within the tourism market to explore potential branding, naming and a wider communications plan that supports the overall standing of Te Anau, Milford Corridor and Milford Sound Piopiotahi as a single destination.*

International precedents reviewed by the team indicated that, while this had short term mind-shift challenges in the market, long term benefits were evident both in greater authenticity of place and promoting wider opportunities across the region.

MASTERPLAN STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: PROPOSALS, PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Improving the quality of the visitor experience was also central to the Masterplan. In part, this was achieved by broadening opportunities to key nodes along the Milford Corridor, diversifying the available activity types, and changing the way visitors access these sought-after locations. The plan adopts an authentic destination management approach that considers the host environment and community as much as the visitor. The Masterplan process and document provided the means to communicate and coordinate this in an integrated way.

A crucial goal of this project is to shift away from an influx of visitors around midday to disperse numbers more evenly across the day. The current model relies heavily on early morning bus departures from Queenstown designed to deliver passengers to a boat tour around Milford Sound Piopiotahi and return them to Queenstown in the evening.

Long stretches of uninterrupted travel have made this an exhausting journey. This project proposed alternative travel models where pauses and varied activities occur in the Te Anau Basin, along the Milford Corridor, and within the Milford Sound Piopiotahi area. This will provide a safer and more purposeful and enjoyable experience for visitors who will benefit from a greater understanding of the natural and cultural significance of the region. A fleet of hop-on-hop-off green buses would support this model while still retaining direct access.

This project is a catalytic undertaking for the local community and Southland region, with Te Anau as its hub. The long-term implementation of the Masterplan will provide greater certainty for Southland District Council, community organisations and local enterprises to invest in other regeneration initiatives, complementary activities, and more local employment opportunities.

The Masterplan is the instrument to direct change to protect the essence of Milford Sound Piopiotahi while optimising the visitor experience. The plan required clear understanding of the current global state (pre-COVID-19) and a clear mission to deliver opportunities within the natural environment, places where visitors are not forced to experience the Milford Corridor and Milford Sound Piopiotahi amidst large and distracting crowds.

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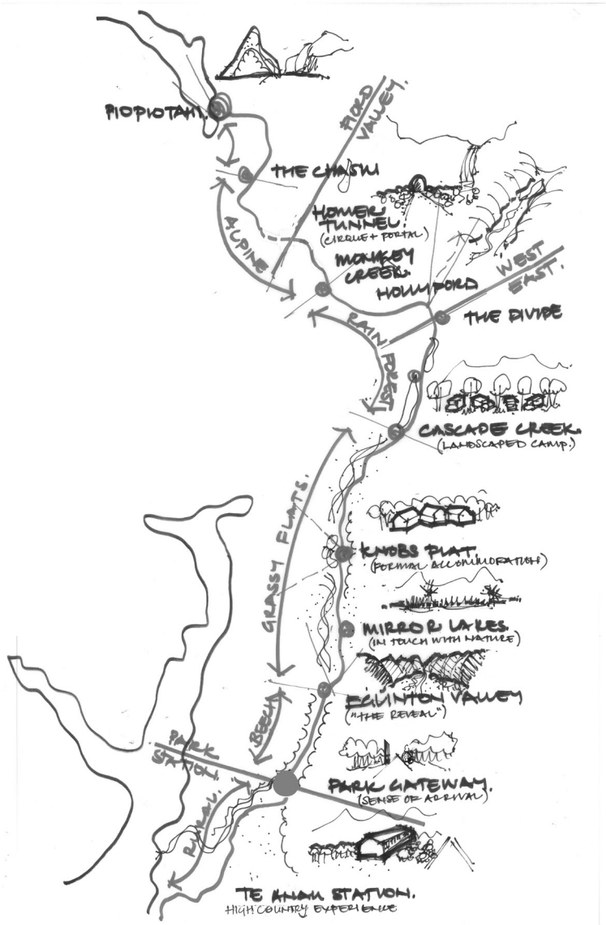
To do this, the Masterplan proposes infrastructure that promotes a range of experiences that visitors can choose to pursue. Challenging issues had to be addressed in developing the Masterplan. Many of them, such as the place and role of the aerodrome and fixed-wing flight services, were focused on Milford Sound Piopiotahi. The broad range of specialist skills spread across many workstreams worked through these iteratively and creatively to optimise the experience for visitors within a highly constrained area and ultimately deliver on the vision and pillars that guided us.

Understanding the project's true meaning and principles, along with their delivery, needed to be determined upfront. As such, our team underpinned technical expertise with an agreed value system of respect and collaboration. This value system allowed everyone's best intentions to protect the environmental and cultural value of Milford Sound Piopiotahi while optimising the visitor experience, resulting in the best possible solutions for tangata whenua, the community, and the region.

A part of this project included managing large numbers of competing interests to hone in on the visitor experience as it relates to the natural environment. The selected team was deliberately diverse in their thinking with comprehensive professional skills across various disciplines, including tourism, governance, legislation, conservation, engineering, risk mitigation, planning, branding, and management. Clear communication that bridged these individual industry perspectives was harnessed to mitigate any future tension or challenges. These varied voices all contributed to assembling information required to support the local narrative of Milford Sound Piopiotahi and to depict its future preservation and success.

The Masterplan is ultimately a strategic framework to implement and doing so is likely to be the most challenging, albeit exciting, stage by far. It will not only take grit and determination, but it will also require clarity of vision and understanding of context. As this is a significant undertaking, it requires a team effort, where success will be measured across a wide array of those that live, play and work in the area. We learned quickly that the



Masterplan would only be possible with a collective voice from the local and national government, mana whenua, communities, and businesses. This journey will be taken together.

It seems fitting that one of the oldest and leading tourism experiences in New Zealand is now one of the first to actively explore a transformational change towards value-added/regenerative tourism.

Respecting Murihiku / Southland's most iconic landscapes, enhancing its conservation values and restoring its strong Ngāi Tahu associations.

At the heart of the Milford Opportunities Masterplan is creating a world-class journey experience, whilst providing direction for long-term sustainable development of the wider region and beyond.

Boffa Miskell

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