

of resisting wind-pressure unless permanently loaded with dead-weight at the base, which is undesirable. In a country like New Zealand, where high winds are frequent in most parts, it would often not be safe to run regular traffic, particularly in mountainous localities, on a line only 2 ft. wide.

The most favourable lines to operate as light lines are disconnected sections carrying their own locomotives and rolling-stock, which never go off the section. It will not be feasible to adopt much lighter construction where a line is traversed by express trains carrying passengers at a high rate of speed, or on lines where coal or timber forms any considerable portion of the freight to be handled, as both these commodities require heavy rolling-stock and a line up to the standard of strength. It is desirable that any section on which the system is tried should be long enough to maintain in use its own equipment of locomotives and rolling-stock. Short branches of a main line, which would necessarily have to be traversed by the rolling-stock of the main line, would be better built in accordance with the usual standards.

ROADS AND BRIDGES.

The provision made on last year's appropriations for road and bridge works under all votes and accounts (including the Consolidated Fund vote for maintenance) amounted to a total of £838,060. As in the previous year, in nearly every case where it was anticipated that the local bodies would undertake the work they were given the opportunity of doing so. The offers of expenditure of available balances on the votes provided on the main and supplementary estimates were despatched on the 16th and 27th October, being the respective dates on which the estimates were presented to Parliament, so that there can be no just complaint of delay in advising local bodies of what moneys were available. Authorities to proceed with works which were to be carried out by the Department's own Engineers were also issued promptly after the passing of the appropriations. Including the unexpended balances of authorities brought forward from the previous financial year, the total authorized during the year amounted to no less a sum than £992,856.

Despite these facts, however, the expenditure of the year amounted to only £526,489, leaving an unexpended balance of authorities amounting to £466,367 as at 31st March last. Between the 1st April last and 31st July further authorities amounting to £145,796 were issued, making the total amount authorized as at 31st July £612,163. The expenditure brought to charge during the four months, 1st April to 31st July, amounted to £160,003. The large sum of money authorized during the financial year shows clearly that an earnest effort was made to give every opportunity of fully expending the votes, but the fact that only £526,489 was expended seems to indicate that it is impossible to expend in the time available so large a sum as was authorized. Shortage of suitable labour at the best time of the year, and the unusually wet weather-conditions which prevailed, doubtless to a large extent adversely affected the progress of works; but one reason I think why the amount voted was not fully expended is the multiplicity of small votes. On last year's appropriations the average amount of votes provided under "Roads, &c." vote for the North Island was approximately £210, the total number of items being about 2,300. It may safely be asserted that the smaller the average amount of individual votes the greater will be the cost of administration and the difficulty of expending them. It is much easier and also less costly to expend £5,000 on one road than to expend £500 on each of ten roads in different localities, and, apart even from the question of facilitating expenditure, I am convinced that a policy of concentrating expenditure of whatever moneys may be available on roads of primary importance instead of doling out a few hundred pounds yearly to each of a ridiculously large number of roads, some of which are only of third- or fourth-rate importance, will result in far greater material progress in the roading of our backblock districts, and eventually prove itself to the best interests of all concerned. The existing obligations in regard to votes previously provided for on the appropriations and works in hand rendered it impracticable to make a commencement with such a policy in compiling the estimates for the current year; but during the recess the question will be carefully gone into, and, combined with a measure giving more assured finance to local governing bodies, I hope to see results achieved in the near future which will speedily remove the disabilities under which many of our settlers at present labour owing to want of adequate means of communication with markets.