

Local Government in Northland

This submission is on behalf of Focus Paihia Community Trust. Contact details are: email, info@focuspaihia.org.nz ; phone, 022 128 3805; address, PO. Box 17, Paihia 0247

The Trust would like to appear before the Commission at a public hearing

Focus Paihia Community Trust sponsored a public meeting on January 21 to discuss the Local Government Commission's proposals for a unitary authority for Northland, and the content of this submission is predominantly taken from the outcomes of this meeting. However a draft document was sent to the Trust's email address list and also put on the Trust's Facebook page. It was then discussed at the Trust's monthly meeting on February 4 before a draft final submission was sent out to the email list again until this final version was accepted by the Trust Board.

The meeting on January 21 was chaired by Grant Harnish, Chairman of Focus Paihia and about 50 people attended including the FNDC Mayor, John Carter, two other FNDC Councillors, Ann Court and Willow-Jean Prime, and two members of the Bay of Islands-Whangaroa Community Board, Belinda Ward and Marty Robinson. To open the meeting, Grant Harnish reviewed the processes for further action on the proposals and read the summary from the proposal document, and this was followed by a brief statement by John Carter encouraging individuals to make their own submissions.

Vote on main proposal. A vote taken at the end of the meeting in favour or against the main proposal of a unitary authority showed an overwhelming majority of those voting were against the proposal.

On more specific aspects of the proposals, the main issues discussed were:

Is amalgamation necessary? There was discussion of this in two dimensions. One was the general acceptance that the four local councils (FNDC, WDC, KDC, and NRC) are working very well together, although there was also note of the frustrations of dealing with more than one council. There was also considerable discussion of the potential for shared services, something which is currently being explored by the councils. The overall view was that the case for amalgamation had not been proved.

Community Boards. It was noted that WDC and KDC did not have community boards, but that as far as FNDC was concerned, the Council was working very closely with its community boards and indeed looked to them to lead the Council in relation to local matters. Community Boards were seen as a key dimension of the proposals, although they might be replaced by Local Boards (see below) if Parliament passed the appropriate legislation later in 2014. But although community boards were intended to represent local community perspectives, the argument was made and generally supported that the proposed community boards were too large. Under the Bay of Islands County Council there had been elected community councils for individual townships such as Paihia, Opua, Russell, Kawakawa and Moerewa; under the present arrangements individual

townships were for the most part given a representative on the Bay of Islands-Whangaroa Community Board, but under the proposed new arrangements Paihia would have to share a single representative with Russell and Opuia. The proposed community board of Coastal North extended for over 100 kms from the outskirts of Whangarei to north of Whangaroa. This trend to diminishing local representation meant the local was being taken out of local government, in spite of the local community being the main building block of civil society as the entity with which most citizens most closely identified. In a more general sense, the need to provide more power to communities in looking after themselves was raised

Local Boards. Local boards currently exist in Auckland, and have a stronger legislative underpinning than community boards, although still subject to the financial control of the Council. It was noted that some of the Auckland local boards had been extremely successful, others less so, although the argument was also made that the successful ones had been those which corresponded most closely to the policies of the Council. Nevertheless, the meeting indicated an interest in the potential for local boards as an alternative to community boards if the current proposals went ahead.

HQ in Whangarei. The meeting felt that the Council headquarters should be closer to the geographic centre of Northland in the mid-north. A further suggestion that met with support was the idea of having rotating meetings between different centres in the way that the Bay of Islands-Whangaroa Community Board does.

Simplified rules and simpler contracts. The proposal claimed that by integrating and having a regional approach to services there would be a reduction in duplication and inefficiency and an opportunity for productivity improvements by region-wide contracting. These are obviously desirable outcomes but other points in this context noted that: many of these issues could be addressed by better management rather than by structural change; that many services are already contracted out; and that staff needed time to talk and interact if they were to avoid the problem of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. The problems still existed even in places where there was already a unitary authority such as Gisborne

Cost savings. The estimate of saving \$5 million was noted, but the meeting was warned not to expect any significant reduction in rates. The issue of rates was raised more generally, and in respect of Table 1 on page 17 the differential rates revenues per person in the existing districts were raised together with the question of equalization if this meant that WDC and KDC ratepayers would have to pay considerably more. It was also noted that there was no attempt to provide a proper cost-benefit analysis of the proposals.

Debt. This was an issue which raised concerns with the meeting, especially in the context of the Mangawhai sewage blowout costs of KDC, even though the KDC Commissioners are said to be confident of significantly reducing this debt in the next five or so years. It was felt that ring-fencing debt for six years might not be enough and that there would be a question of how debt would apportioned after this time.

The meeting accepted that there were other issues which time did not permit to be raised.