

Lawrence - Speech to Community Boards Conference

I am sorry that I am unable to attend in person due to competing priorities including the Havelock North Water Inquiry release and my attendance at the Air New Zealand Marathon which is a large but very new event in Hawke's Bay. I know LGNZ has been well represented by CEO Malcolm Alexander and Mayor Don Cameron.

I am will stand down as President of LGNZ on 25 July after 9 years in the role. It has been a wonderful period in my life and an honour to represent Councillors and elected members during this time. This includes Mayors, Councillors, Local Board members, Community Board members and staff. I wish to thank you for your support and guidance during this time. The work Local Government does for individuals, families, communities and the environment should never be underestimated or valued. I am extremely proud of it.

I have always been a strong supporter of Community Boards based in our very successful Rural Community Board in Hastings.

The role and acceptance of community Boards has varied over time but they are currently enjoying more support and recognition. The public sentiment and support for things that make a difference in their immediate community has resulted in a change in direction and approach from many Councils and importantly the Local Government Commission. While some service delivery can be centralised the Commission is now a strong advocate of Community Boards as a way of ensuring a local voice in such changes.

There is still work to be done with many Councils to devolve more powers and decision making to Community Boards. The current level of devolution largely rests with the political appetite of the Mayor and Councillors. In the medium term more options around this need to be put forward by the Local Government Commission and potential legislative change. I have always seen Community Boards as an opportunity rather than a threat and there is still major upside in further support of Community Boards.

While amalgamations are off the table there will still be an ongoing quest for efficiency gains. Democracy will however remain a key determinate in public acceptance of any changes.

I wish to particularly thank and acknowledge the great work done by CBEC Chair Mick Lester. As well as being a personal friend, former Councillor and Community Board member Mick has done an amazing job with the support of LGNZ in transforming CBEC to what it is today. I have watched this journey including at times offering support. Mick dedication, hard work and belief in CBEC is something I greatly admire and something I would like to formally acknowledge.

As I attempt to move into Central Government politics please be assured I will always be a strong advocate for Local Government and community representation and democracy. I believe there is still work to be done on improving the reputation of the sector and efficiency of service delivery but this should not be at the cost of a large scale loss of democracy. For this reason I am and will remain a strong supporter of Community Boards.

Best wishes for the future and thank you for what you do across New Zealand.

End

Mayor Don Cameron – Community Boards Conference.

According to the LGNZ website there are currently 110 community boards throughout New Zealand.

They can vary from large to small and are empowered to varying degrees.

What they should all share in common however is the function of representing, and acting as an advocate for, the interests of their communities, and ensuring that councils and other public agencies address community issues.

From my experience, most community boards have limited delegated powers, and for the most part many are perceived by councils as at best a 'listening post' for community concerns that then make recommendations to where the real power is held.

Ruapehu has two community boards and in recent years Council has tried as part of our Review of our Electoral Arrangements to both disestablish or amend them.

Council had proposed that community boards were an unnecessary and expensive cost to the communities they were supposed to serve and that community advocacy groups knew their communities the best and that most groups had grown to where they could strongly represent the views of their communities.

It was proposed that between community groups and councillors that the communities views could be heard for less than what community boards cost.

These attempts to disestablish our community boards failed.

During our last Representation review in 2015 Council had proposed a new model where-by the community boards be divided into smaller electoral areas called 'subdivisions'.

Each subdivision would have had its own elected members rather than having all elected members 'elected at large'.

Council's thinking was that having smaller electoral areas (subdivisions) would have provided a basis for electing people more closely aligned with the communities of interest they are voted to represent.

Residents and ratepayers within a subdivision could nominate people to represent them who they feel more closely understand and represent who they are.

Despite strong arguments in favour of retaining the community boards in their historic format, it was felt that the old structure and ways were not delivering the level of representation that many people and communities wanted.

On the whole it was felt that the community boards were no longer fulfilling their original purpose frustrating the Boards, Council and the community.

Ultimately, Council voted in favour of introducing sub-divisions only to have the decision overturned by the Electoral Commission and as a result the status-quo remains.

Ruapehu's experience is probably the norm.

Although Council's can debate the perceived lack of relevance of community boards, cost of elections and operation, limited powers and 'listening post' status their local communities refuse to let them go.

I can truly put my hand on heart and say that Ruapehu's actions in attempting to firstly disestablish, and then reform our community boards was driven from a desire to provide better governance and representation for our communities.

The fact that our communities fought quite hard against these proposed changes, despite there often being a lack of candidates willing to put their hand up to stand for community boards, and turnout for community board elections being very low makes one wonder what is going on.

The truth of course is somewhat complicated.

On one hand, we have local government sector issues of the type highlighted by the 2014 LGNZ national Colmar Brunton survey that found that only 37% of the public felt that local government had the skills and expertise to manage community affairs.

Although community boards often have little mana in the communities they serve they are no doubt seen as another lever for communities to 'keep us honest' and help ensure that we represent their interests and desires.

There is also no doubt that people value their communities of interest.

The last 20 years or so saw central government attempt to constantly reshape local government in the name of efficiency with the carrot of a lesser burden on ratepayers.

This efficiency was to be found through economies of scale achieved in significant part via amalgamations.

The result however, where there were amalgamations was undoubtedly some improvement in efficiency but with little or no reduction in cost to ratepayers.

As such, for the most all proposed amalgamations (with the exception of Wairarapa) have been voted down by the affected communities.

People obviously thought that they would lose more than they would gain and losing their 'local voice' was a key part of that.

In Ruapehu's case I suspect the same is true of community boards and our attempts to disestablish or change them.

In an increasingly complex, modern world with its many economic, environmental, social and other challenges maybe it should be of little surprise that communities want to hold on to what they have and mistrust our attempts to take things away from them.

So what to do...

If community boards are here to stay, and more so if there are growing demands for them to have a greater role and bigger responsibilities, we (councils) need to ensure that they are empowered to deliver the level of representation that people and communities want.

We also (somehow) need to encourage more diverse, skilled and capable people aspire to stand to be elected to them.

Dear I say that encouraging more diverse, skilled and capable people to stand for community board election could be enhanced by councils firstly empowering community boards to deliver the level of representation that people and communities want.

This means councils giving their community boards a greater role and bigger responsibilities.

Without councils placing more trust in their community boards, which invariably means giving community boards larger financial responsibilities, it is improbable we will get the more diverse, skilled and capable people we need to serve on community boards.

A case of the proverbial well financed, significant issue chicken before the diverse, skilled and capable egg.

Once people are elected we need to be committed to supporting them to be the best that they can be.

This means a commitment to on-going education and training.

The skilled and capable in our communities, if considering standing for local government will no doubt ask themselves “why stand for the community board when I can stand for council.”

It is councils responsibility to help answer that question for them and help people to see the community boards are worthy of their precious time and efforts.

By building the mana and capability of our community boards, we will no doubt start to attract the community board representatives that our communities deserve.

In Ruapehu – I know that council – both elected members and staff - have a huge workload and are struggling to meet the demands of the communities they serve.

If we have community boards it seems mad to not be making the very best possible use of them.

Councils need to work hard and have the confidence to give community boards and their representatives the real influence in shaping the future for their communities that they deserve.

End.