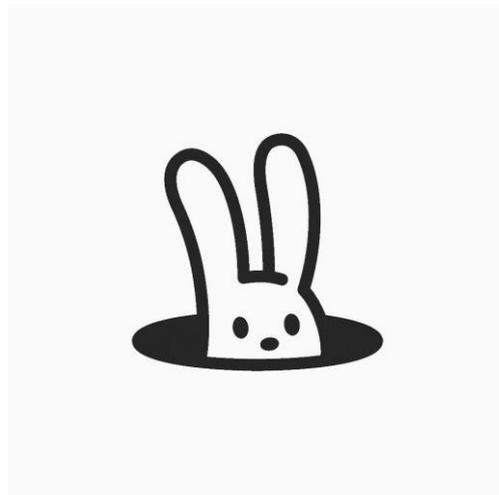


Greater Bunnythorpe Community and Board Proposal Appeal to the Local Government Commission

14 December 2021



Bunnythorpe Matters!

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Greater Bunnythorpe Community and Board Proposal 2021

On 13 June 2021, at a public meeting called by local elector Aaron Fox with the support of local elector Dale O'Reilly, more than 130 people met at the Bunnythorpe School to consider and vote upon a proposal that Bunnythorpe and the surrounding areas which came into Palmerston North City in 2012 be formed into the Greater Bunnythorpe community with a community board. The proposal was carried by unanimous acclamation, and 128 signatures were gathered. The completed proposal was submitted to the Palmerston North City Council (PNCC) on 14 June 2021.

Describing Greater Bunnythorpe

The Greater Bunnythorpe proposal was designed in accordance with Schedule 6 of the *Local Government Act 2002*.

- The area sits within the boundaries of the Palmerston North City Council.
- The area is delineated by a set of continuous statistical mesh blocks based around the village of Bunnythorpe.
- The area is confined to those mesh block areas of residential and rural land in and around Bunnythorpe which were transferred to the Palmerston North City Council in 2012.
- The population of the proposed Greater Bunnythorpe community is less than 1,500 people.

A well-connected community

The Greater Bunnythorpe proposal also recognised that the village of Bunnythorpe and environs represents an identifiable community of interest distinct from urban Palmerston North or other rural settlements within the Palmerston North City Council's boundaries. In 2012 the PNCC acknowledged Bunnythorpe as one of the 'distinct communities of interest' within the city. There already exist a number of community loci, including the Bunnythorpe School, the rugby club, the volunteer fire brigade, centres of worship – including the Bunnythorpe Family Church, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Buddha Chey Mongkul Monastery – the tavern, and the new community centre.

A community in transition

Since 2012, much of the interaction between Bunnythorpe and the Palmerston North City Council has been through the auspices of the Bunnythorpe Community Centre Association (BCCA) and a sub-committee which met regularly to discuss community issues. Meetings of the sub-committee also provided a convenient and informal line of communication with the Palmerston North City Council, principally with respect to council service delivery. The completion of the Bunnythorpe Community Centre in 2021 will necessarily change the focus of the BCCA which will henceforth manage the community centre facility. The future of the sub-committee is also under local review. The Greater Bunnythorpe proposal therefore represents an opportunity to further strengthen by means of a Community Board the community's relationship with both the PNCC and Horizons Regional Council and ensure that the distinct issues and identity of the community can be represented and addressed appropriately.

A community facing challenges

The community encompassed by the requested Community Board experiences specific challenges that are distinct from those experienced by other parts of the PNCC area, as the council looks to direct future industrial growth into this part of the city. Both the Council, as promoter of these changes, and the community, as the potential host for these major new activities, will benefit from the enhanced platform for discussion and local input offered by the requested Community Board. Such challenges, which will bring ongoing and longstanding changes to the community, include:

- A proposal by KiwiRail to construct a 177.7hectare multimodal freight hub immediately beside Bunnythorpe, which, if approved, will have significant local impacts. The proposed industrial development is supported by the Palmerston North City Council; the Community Board will provide an important platform to ensure the Council understands and can respond to ongoing impacts of this large-scale development on this small, distinct community.
- Proposals by Waka Kotahi for a transport ring road which may bisect or surround Bunnythorpe would have major impacts on the community on a scale larger than any cost or benefit experienced in other parts of the city.
- A new proposal by Central Economic Development Agency for a freight hub-related housing development in Bunnythorpe, funded by a local special purpose levy.

The community continues to experience ongoing problems with existing infrastructure in and around the village; and especially narrow country roads used by heavy road transport vehicles, undersized bridges, and a woefully inadequate three waters infrastructure.

These issues were all strongly canvassed by Bunnythorpe representatives during the PNCC's 2021 Long Term Plan hearings.

A community wanting greater local representation

Local support for the Greater Bunnythorpe proposal is partly based on a desire to improve the representation arrangements for the community. A petition in 2019 requested that the PNCC consider creating a community board for the village, but the council determined to retain the existing system of electing councillors at large, without either wards or community boards. There is an abiding impression amongst the community that big decisions are made for Bunnythorpe either in Palmerston North or Wellington, without reference to the community. The experience of KiwiRail's Notice of Requirement for the intermodal freight hub is a case in point – while KiwiRail maintains regular contact with the PNCC with respect to the freight hub project, KiwiRail's communications and consultation with the local community have been perfunctory and irregular. The social impact assessment prepared for KiwiRail was a desktop exercise without reference to the community, while the PNCC is on record as regarding local concerns as a potential risk to the development of the freight hub proposal. A community board would serve to formalise future consultation and engagement with councils and government agencies when proposals have a direct impact on the local community.

A community wanting to improve

As noted above, the Greater Bunnythorpe proposal also holds the prospect of being a positive initiative for both the community and the council. Mike Lester, the Chair of the Community Boards Executive Committee has stated: 'Community boards are important for all New Zealanders because they make local government more accessible and help to raise ratepayer awareness of services, issues and events'. A community board offers the prospect of effective community engagement and community development within Greater Bunnythorpe, with the board able to work with the PNCC to prioritise and timetable critical infrastructure work, placemaking initiatives and community events. The community board can only help strengthen a community that is already highly-engaged and keen to participate in identifying and voicing local priorities and preferences. The potential benefits to both the local community and the PNCC include effective community-building opportunities based upon local facilities, institutions and organisations, enhancing local amenities and promoting community safety and recreation. There is also considerable potential to develop and promote participatory democracy within the community by educating and encouraging residents to have confidence in, engage with and become involved in grassroots local government.

Formulating the proposal

Local participatory democracy is not a new concept for Bunnythorpe. The recent national debate regarding Māori Wards on local councils, and the PNCC's vote in April 2021 to introduce Māori Wards for Palmerston North encouraged a fresh approach to a community board for Bunnythorpe and the surrounding area. The PNCC's 2011 submission in support of the 2012 boundary change noted the advantages for communities – including Bunnythorpe – which would move to Palmerston North, whereby 'distinct communities of interest' would enjoy 'effective governance'. It was also noted that PNCC's 7 April 2021 submission against application by the rural townships of Opiki and Tokomaru to come into Palmerston North acknowledged that effective and fair representation for rural communities might best be met by community boards. Even the recent representation review by the PNCC acknowledged that Bunnythorpe has 'a strong perceptual community of interest'. Above all, the combination of significant local issues with a strong and active community encouraged a number of locals to work up the Greater Bunnythorpe Community and Board proposal.

The process followed the requirements of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act and was based upon those meshblock areas which were brought into Palmerston North in 2012. The proposed area needed to be continuous, within the PNCC boundaries and based on statistical mesh blocks. For a population of less than 1,500 people, no less than 100 electors needed to be in majority at a public meeting to support the proposal. A community with a population of less than 1,500 was then identified and mapped out. Two public meetings were called by Aaron Fox by means of public notices in the *Manawatu Standard* and the *Feilding-Rangitikei Herald* and letterbox and post office box drops within the meshblock areas. It became abundantly clear during this process that the residents of the proposed Greater Bunnythorpe area could all see the lights of Bunnythorpe village, sitting at the heart of the community.

A preliminary meeting at the Taonui Hall on 1 June was attended by just over 50 people. The details of the Greater Bunnythorpe Community proposal were discussed, and those present agreed that a second public meeting should be held on Sunday 13 June in Bunnythorpe.

Greater Bunnythorpe Meeting – 13 June 2021

At the meeting at Bunnythorpe School on 13 June 2021 Aaron Fox observed that the strong turnout on a Sunday afternoon demonstrated that there existed ‘a strong community spirit and an obvious desire to do something positive to support the Bunnythorpe township and the surrounding area’. He then explained that a community board ‘would not replace existing community groups or initiatives, but rather would provide a strong, formal voice for those groups and initiatives to the Council and offer a conduit for the Council to work with the community.’

The meeting then considered the following proposals (as outlined on the meeting agenda):

- a) to support the proposal that Bunnythorpe and its surrounds (as detailed on the plan presented to the meeting) be constituted as the Greater Bunnythorpe Community.
CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY
- b) That those present, being electors resident within the boundaries of the proposed Bunnythorpe Community Board, agree to sign and present to the Palmerston North City Council the proposal to become the: Greater Bunnythorpe Community and Community Board. **CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Attendees who were electors resident within the boundaries of the proposed Greater Bunnythorpe Community Board (as detailed on the plan presented to the meeting) were invited to sign the proposal, and a grand total of 128 signatures was gathered.

Response from the PNCC

The submission was hand delivered to the PNCC on 14 June 2021. An officer from the PNCC had already queried if the proposal could be considered as part of the council’s wider representation review, even though this review specifically excluded community boards. The same officer suggested that Bunnythorpe’s community of interest could be combined with the neighbouring rural village of Ashhurst, although the latter community is not facing the multiple challenges of road and rail freight proposals and aging infrastructure.

The options analysis of the Greater Bunnythorpe proposal which was prepared for the 4 August 2021 meeting of the PNCC included a number of questionable observations, including:

- That Bunnythorpe is not a distinctive or cohesive community
- That there is not a shared understanding of key issues for residents
- That the proposal lacked a ‘shared problem definition’
- That the community board proposal might divide PNCC’s representation arrangements with ‘unintended adverse consequences’ if a single community were to be arbitrarily singled-out over other communities.
- That the existing representation arrangements in combination with informal mechanisms might ‘more closely align to the aspirations of residents than a formal community board’
- That ‘servicing a community board will not be as efficient as servicing an at-large only council’.
- That if the PNCC did not consider a community board necessary, and if the community board did not trust the council, this would serve to hinder the work of the community board.

- That the annual costs of the community board would be approximately \$70,000. This figure appears to include funds delegated by the PNCC to the board to undertake delegated responsibilities.

4 August 2021 Meeting of the PNCC

No opportunity was provided to either submitters or signatories to speak to the Greater Bunnythorpe proposal at the council meeting. The only speaker was Hannah White, the council's Democracy and Governance Manager, who was unable to speak to questions relating to the framing of content of the proposal. When the proposal was debated, neither of the two councillors who attend community meetings in Bunnythorpe made any comment on the proposal. The only member of the neighbourhoods, villages and rural portfolio who spoke made repeated references to Ashhurst rather than Bunnythorpe, while a second councillor used the term 'bureaucracy' pejoratively to describe a proposal which requested formalised democratic participation at a community level. A number of councillors were confused by the process which Ms White had outlined to them and failed to understand the separate stages before or after public consultation, as specified in Schedule 6 of the LGA, when the council could choose to decline the proposal.

A majority of councillors voted to 'reject the Greater Bunnythorpe proposal of 13 June 2021 and place public notice of this decision'.

Appeal to the Local Government Commission

In accordance with 7 (1) of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act 2002, as a signatory to this proposal, I hereby appeal to the Local Government Commission the decision by the Palmerston North City Council on 4 August 2021 to reject the proposal, and request that the Local Government Commission approve the proposal to constitute the Greater Bunnythorpe Community Board dated 13 June 2021.

Dr Aaron Fox

Attachments and Links

- **Attached – Greater Bunnythorpe proposal 14 June 2021**
- **Attached - Bunnythorpe News Issue No. 6 June/July 2021**
- **Greater Bunnythorpe proposal as presented to council:**
http://palmerstonnorth.infocouncil.biz/Open/2021/08/COU_20210804_AGN_10936_AT_files/COU_20210804_AGN_10936_AT_Attachment_25763_1.PDF
- **Greater Bunnythorpe proposal: Palmerston North City Council staff options analysis:**
http://palmerstonnorth.infocouncil.biz/Open/2021/08/COU_20210804_AGN_10936_AT_files/COU_20210804_AGN_10936_AT_Attachment_25763_2.PDF
- **Minutes of the Palmerston North Council Meeting 4 August 2021:**
http://palmerstonnorth.infocouncil.biz/Open/2021/08/COU_20210804_MIN_10936.HTM#PDF2_ReportName_25763
- <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/125296696/village-residents-feel-lifestyle-sacrificed-for-big-city-progress>
- <https://www.stuff.co.nz/manawatu-standard/news/125927752/bunnythorpe-seeks-a-community-board-to-avoid-being-railroaded>
- <https://www.stuff.co.nz/manawatu-standard/news/125965451/bunnythorpe-denied-its-demand-for-a-community-board>