



# Carterton District Council

## Submission to Local Government Commission regarding the Draft Proposal for Local Government Reorganisation in the Wellington Region

### **CDC rejects draft proposal**

The Carterton District Council does not agree with the draft proposal for one Greater Wellington Council.

### **CDC joint applicant for Wairarapa unitary authority**

The Carterton District Council was one of the joint applicants for a Wairarapa unitary authority which initiated the current reorganisation process in the Wellington Region.

This joint application to the Local Government Commission was made following a very large amount of analysis, independent advice from very reputable professional consultants, and widespread discussion and consultation over several years by the three Wairarapa councils.

The Carterton District Council and its neighbouring councils came to the view that the status quo was not necessarily the best local government arrangement for the future and after much work, they concluded that a unitary authority was their preferred future structure for Wairarapa. This conclusion and the resulting application to the Local Government Commission were supported by 27 of the 31 elected members in the Wairarapa including the Wairarapa constituency councillor on the Greater Wellington Regional Council.

### **Public support for Wairarapa application**

Several surveys of public opinion over the preceding period showed that the three Councils had solid support from the Wairarapa community and beyond for a Wairarapa unitary authority, but it needs to be noted that there was also a lot of support for the current status quo arrangements. These surveys consistently showed very limited support for Wairarapa to be governed by a wider Wellington-centred council.

### **Councils' views**

All the current city and district councils in the Wellington region have expressed the view that Wairarapa should not be 'forced' to be under a Wellington-centred council. They have also expressed a willingness to work with the Wairarapa on matters of common interest whatever future governance arrangements might be. The only existing council with a contrary view was the Greater Wellington Regional Council, and then by only eight



votes to five – now effectively seven votes to six.

**Existing unitary councils comparable**

The Wairarapa councils have been very aware that several existing unitary councils are operating in NZ with populations only slightly higher than Wairarapa and yet with noticeably larger areas to cover than Wairarapa. Feedback from those unitary councils has been that they would not want to be under any other governance arrangement.

**CDC very disappointed that LGC did not approve the joint application**

The Carterton District Council is very disappointed that the Local Government Commission did not approve the joint application from the Wairarapa councils. It is particularly disappointing that the very unique situation of three councils voluntarily agreeing to amalgamate was rejected by the Commission.

This rejection appears from the detailed reports to be largely based on future challenges as envisaged by selected consultants rather than on how Wairarapa residents and elected members see their own future situation. A significant factor here is future flood management costs where projected capital expenditure to the stated extent is not seen as justified by local floodplain management committees.

**Quoted figures are excessive**

It is noted that the Commission is still quoting the \$10 - 11 million that relates to annual figures provided earlier by the Greater Wellington Regional Council. This was an allocated figure of regional council costs less income, and was not the additional costs for a new Wairarapa unitary authority. Just four years earlier, the equivalent figure, also provided by the regional council, was \$4.5 million and there has been no satisfactory explanation for the large increase in such a short time despite a written request.

The \$10 to 11 million figure above included about \$2.3 million dollars for forestry, largely the costs for debt servicing of very significant loans. The Greater Wellington Regional Council sold all its forestry blocks last year and cleared the relevant debt. Hence the adjusted figure, if it had any relevance in the first place, should be less than \$8 to 9 million dollars.

**No to one council for Wellington and Wairarapa regions**

The Carterton District Council does not support the Local Government Commission's draft recommendation of one Wellington Council with local boards. Surveys over several years have shown that a large majority of our residents do not support that concept.

**Wairarapa is very different to Wellington**

The main reason for this lack of support is that Wairarapa is not a suburb or natural part of Wellington in local government terms. It is a rural / provincial area with different issues, different priorities, and a very different 'culture' to metropolitan Wellington. To illustrate this point using some simple comparisons, Wairarapa has a different provincial rugby team, a different weather forecast and a daily newspaper. Some Wellingtonians 'escape' to Wairarapa to get away from their busy lives in the same way as Aucklanders go to Coromandel, but that is irrelevant to local government boundaries.

**Emotional disconnect**

The Council considers that the Local Government Commission's report significantly over-states the connections between Wairarapa and Wellington to try and make the case for one Greater Wellington Council. Wairarapa people do not generally consider themselves part of Wellington. Wairarapa is their home, not Wellington. The large majority of Wairarapa people are not emotionally connected to Wellington and to assume so is very likely to lead to an incompatible union with ongoing tensions.

**Geographical disconnect**

Wairarapa is separated from Wellington by a significant mountain range. The only physical connections are one somewhat tortuous road that can be closed on occasions, and one railway line. The catchments are completely separate. While Wairarapa was placed within the Wellington Region in 1989, there was much protest at the time and there was no vote allowed for citizens on the subject. This change was largely based at the time on proposed environmental legislation and much has changed since that time. Wairarapa has economic and other linkages to the north to the Tararua District, Manawatu, and Hawkes Bay. In particular, most agricultural products go north for processing, yet no-one is suggesting any northward mergers.

**Keep democracy local**

The large majority of Wairarapa people are very concerned about representation and local democracy. They do not want a situation of a largely metropolitan-focussed council making the big/important decisions relating to Wairarapa's future.

**Mixed experience with GWRC**

The Carterton District Council's views and experience of the Greater Wellington Regional Council is a mixed one. On one hand, they have applied some funding policies that are significantly more generous than elsewhere in the country; e.g. for flood control and land management. On the other hand they are often seen as over-complicating matters and being expensive, and that too many matters are considered from a

'city' viewpoint. There is also a realism that the 'generous' funding policies referred to above may not continue under a completely new 'super-council' scenario in the future now that far more people are aware of these policies and who is funding them.

**Super-city would focus on metro Wellington**

Under the proposal, Wairarapa will be caught up in numerous Wellington metropolitan-type issues that are irrelevant to Wairarapa people. There is an element of this occurring now with the regular Mayoral Forum and Regional Chief Executive's Forum meetings where a large proportion of the matters discussed are of no direct relevance to Wairarapa representatives.

**Local board too limited**

A Wairarapa local board is seen as having quite limited powers and authority and it will be subservient to the governing body despite the arguments to the contrary in the Commission's report. There will be seven other local boards also advocating and competing for funding and resources despite Wairarapa comprising 75% of the land area of the region.

**No consultation by the Commission**

The Carterton District Council is listed in the Commission's report as having been one of the first consultations undertaken by the Local Government Commission. In reality, this meeting on 9 July 2013 was no more than introducing people and advising on the overall process that the Commission would be following.

**Questionable process**

We note clause 13 of Schedule 3 of the Local Government Act 2002. This clause says that the Local Government Commission must give notice to each applicant and affected local authority after determining its preferred option. It can then proceed to develop a draft reorganisation proposal to give effect to the preferred option. It seems that the Commission did not follow this clause in the legislation.

**Savings questioned**

The Council has noted the very large estimated cost of transition to one council and that some savings have been assumed on the basis of economies of scale. However, there can also be diseconomies of scale with increased bureaucracy in a very large organisation and especially where increased distances can be involved. Some parts of Wairarapa are well over two hours travel time from Wellington and that is without the regular traffic congestion that occurs on the main highways.

**Flawed analysis of options**

In its consideration of options, the Commission ruled out the possibility of one Wairarapa district council, largely on the basis

of an estimated cost of \$25.5 million for IT systems.

The Wairarapa councils have since advised the Commission's staff that the three councils are largely on the same IT systems now and that the current provider who is familiar with the systems has given an approximate estimate of \$300,000 to \$500,000 to integrate the three council's systems. This figure is so different to the \$25.5 million in the report that it throws doubt on the validity of other figures and conclusions within the report.

#### **Manufactured crisis**

Lastly, the Council does not accept the over-riding theme of the Commission's report which seems to be that the Wellington Region is facing a crisis and the only answer is one council across the whole area.

An example of this is the comments about water pipes with the majority said to be in poor or very poor condition across much of the region. The reality is that exiting councils are managing their water networks and other assets and undertaking renewals as their actual condition requires, not because they have reached a certain age.

#### **Conclusion**

The Carterton District Council strongly favours the status quo arrangements rather than the Local Government Commission's very contentious proposal for one Greater Wellington council. The proposal is very high cost with high risks especially when so many residents are clearly opposed. This Council, like most of its citizens, prefers a smaller council which is more in touch with its community.

Continuing with the status quo in the meantime will not rule out other more acceptable options for improvements in the future. The three Wairarapa councils are increasingly working together in a cooperative manner and if anything has been gained out of this current exercise, it is that there is a greater cooperative attitude amongst the councils and a high level of support and interest from the community.



John Booth  
Mayor