



Infrastructure governance in the midst of revolutionary change

A 'quiet revolution' is unfolding around infrastructure governance in regional New Zealand that holds immense promise

The Far North is a fitting place for the changes to start. Much to their credit, and with some incentivisation from central government, the four councils and NZTA have recently agreed to establish a shared business unit to manage the roading network of Northland.

The Northland Transportation Alliance (NTA) was launched at the end of May, and will be formally established on 1 July. It is the first shared service, certainly of scale, for the four councils. It involves shared staffing, based in Whangarei and the Far North.

Accountability for NTA rests with the five parties to the agreement. The NTA will manage and oversee asset management, procurement and operations, providing more sealed roads, more upgrade roads and a better cycleway network. The business unit has the opportunity to develop as a governance entity, but this will be a matter for the parties to consider as confidence grows, and results are forthcoming.

An immediate win for Northland is the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA) assuming responsibility for an alternative State Highway to SH 1 from Whangarei to Kaikohe. Clearly this will have a favourable impact on several councils' balance sheets, while an estimated \$18 million of benefits are forecast in the NTA business case over the next 10 years.

Collaboration continues

The Northland councils are also looking to collaborate on a range of other identified infrastructure and shared service activities.

Significant momentum has already been achieved in the economic development space with active engagement of the central

government and councils.

The key is strategic leadership from the councils, central government and communities. Genuine collaboration and a framework for prioritised action are also critical elements.

I recently visited Gisborne in my Local Government Commission capacity, and subsequently acknowledged the 'cutting edge' arrangements established in roading between Gisborne District Council and NZTA (Tairāwhiti Roads), and in a shared regulatory management of water between Te Rūnanganui o Ngāti Porou and the council. As with the Northland example, I have little doubt that the innovation being shown in this district will harvest significant benefits for residents, ratepayers and taxpayers alike.

"The key to a Metropolitan Urban Limit or a Regional Urban Boundary is to provide opportunities for the market to operate within"

There are other examples of good strategic collaboration and shared services happening across New Zealand. The Bay of Plenty has long stood out as the exemplar of strategic planning and collaboration, such as Smart Growth around Tauranga, and with shared services across the bay and Gisborne through BOPLASS.

Other regions actively discussing 'joined up' thinking and structures include the Waikato, Wellington and the West Coast. The latter two regions are working alongside the Local Government Commission.

There is much to be positive about in this 'quiet revolution'. There is extensive opportunity going forward, the key being active collaboration, and impor-

tantly from my local government experience, retaining the ability of communities to 'shape their place' through their elected representatives on the councils.

Clear consensus

Elsewhere, a degree of consensus seemed to have broken out recently amongst three of the political parties on removing Metropolitan Urban Limits (MULs) from the public lexicon.

Metropolitan Urban Limits are no more than a public policy line which is drawn, and redrawn from time to time to reflect the various values of a community. These values are defined and captured ultimately by politicians through analysis and debate.

'Removing' an MUL does not, and will not, remove the debate on these community values. Such

values in the Auckland context may typically be 'protecting the high quality soils of Pukekohe', 'the rural qualities of the Clevedon Valley', 'the flora and fauna of the Hunua and Waitakere Ranges', 'water quality of the Auckland harbours and rivers, the protection of wonderful beaches, the heritage of Maori and early settlers'. The list goes on.

All of these values have a spatial context. Policy makers draw lines around these values which are then translated into a legal framework. The Auckland Council has renamed the MUL as a RUB (Rural Urban Boundary), which has more flexibility from the former MUL but its purpose is the same. It gives certainty to the community and to developers. Huge investment decisions, both public and private,



depend on this certainty.

The key to an MUL or a RUB is to provide opportunities for the market to operate. Sufficient land, both greenfield and brownfield, needs to be made available to minimise speculation and land banking. My old City of Manukau, with growth rates of 10,000 people per annum over many years, provided confidence to land developers and house builders as to land availability through the identification of future growth areas, structure planning and timely infrastructure investment. MULs and RUBs are good public policy tools. It is how you utilise the tools that matters.

Finally, I am delighted that the central government is about to release a National Policy Statement on Auckland's urban growth. While I may or may not agree with what is in this statement, it is with some relief that a central government is finally about to release such a statement.

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