



The Northern Action Group Incorporated

Christmas Newsletter: December 2023

Hello NAG supporters,

This newsletter from me is now well overdue and with Christmas upon us this is a good time to reflect on what has been happening this year. Apologies in advance if this Newsletter is too long!!

With a new coalition government now in place and the prospect of restoring fiscal responsibility after a significant period of excessive government borrowing to finance its redistribution policies, you would be forgiven for thinking that Rodney and the rural areas are in for a period of tough times and restraint along with the rest of the country.

In some ways that is right. We all have to trim our expectations and our spending budgets to respond to the impacts of the inflation generated by government action and policies over the last few years, and a period of slow international growth and instability. We clearly can't persistently sustain spending levels funded by the money of other people and of future generations.

However, this year has seen your election of a mayor who understands rural issues and their differences from city needs, and of a local board looking to be more responsive to what Rodney's communities want - rather than what others think is best for them,

Together with a national policy shift of focus to improving NZ's economic productivity and prosperity there are some good signs that Rodney and the rural sector can look forward to a period of relatively better outcomes.

NAG's efforts on your behalf this year have sought to get recognition of the effects on our rural Rodney communities and ratepayers – who make up half of Rodney's ratepayers. We are all stuck out on the remote northern end of an urban centric Auckland that doesn't want to let go of Rodney because of its resources which can be exploited, additional rates funding which can be redirected for iconic urban projects, and our beautiful recreational areas which can be used as free get-a-ways for AC's urban denizens.

No recognition is given to the largely rural nature of the District and how the needs of rural communities and people, and the services they get from Council, differ from those of small or large urban and city areas.

AGM

This year's AGM was held on the 5th of June. It was well attended, with interest at that time in the forthcoming national elections.

[Slides](#) which cover the content meeting are on our website. We advised we had presented our [ideas for taking Rodney forward](#) in their new term to the RLB on 15 March, and had met

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with mayor in Warkworth to outline our [list of active issues](#) on 13 March along with other community groups.

Again we confirmed that NAG has no annual subscription – just what supporters are willing to contribute. So please pass this newsletter on to anyone you think might be interested in following and supporting what we are trying to achieve.

3 Waters

A good win here with a new Government reversing a policy of nationalisation that was never going to benefit us.

Billboards

We have not given these any attention lately, with the competition for roadside space from political candidates, but now the election is over we can return to our campaign to get a better deal for Rodney.

Subdivision boundary review

You will recall back in 2020 we supported a call by our Councillor Greg Sayers to have AC resolve different subdivision boundaries in Rodney local board area (LBA) for the 2023 local body elections. AC declined that review because of concerns that might open up reviews of representation and boundaries in other areas of Auckland.

In 2024 AC has to review representation for the 2025 elections and NAG is keen to see the revised boundaries drawn on urban/rural lines presented as the proposal for Rodney. The status quo is based on an urban-centric “place” based allocation of boundaries and NAG, the LCA and RCV are promoting the change as providing fairer representation of the need for, and provision of, local government services in Rodney.

For the full story on this issue, go to our [Survey Background](#) paper, and if you haven't yet, please! complete the [survey](#) for Rodney ratepayers.

NAG, together with RCV and the LCA, has already made a presentation to the RLB, arranged for them to meet to discuss and understand the representation process and what is involved, and suggested that other rural based areas (like Franklin) might also find the urban/rural classification appropriate for its LBA. We continue to make presentations to interested ratepayer and community groups.

We have met a surprising amount of preciousness from our elected representatives in seeking to promote a wider discussion in communities of the process and its implications before the governing body comes out with its proposals next year (which it must resolve for consultation). Elected representatives are either fearful of changes to the status quo (since their positions are affected) or worried that any extensive public discussion might compromise their ability to decide what they think is best for us.

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While elected representatives are clearly conflicted in proposing the ways in which they may or may not get themselves re-elected, the legislation requires them to do so and they are clearly keen to control the process.

Given the general apathy usually associated with responses to council proposals and the disillusionment with the “have your say” process (which is largely a numbers game with individual responses effectively ignored and not replied to) whatever the governing body comes up with initially it is likely to have the greatest chance of ultimately being implemented.

We have therefore been working hard with council staff involved and their elected representatives to promote a broader understanding of what “communities of interest” means in the legislation and that for places like Rodney a system of representation based on recognition of the rural/urban distinction provides for fairer representation

Other things we have worked on:

Auckland is Broke

In my May newsletter I mentioned that NAG had provided a response to the council’s budget for the current year to suggest how he could balance the books, but I didn't provide you with the [link which is here](#).

Now the mayor and the governing body are continuing to grapple with the same problems all over again, amidst the uncertainty of the new government’s support for Auckland and its development, elected council members’ unwillingness to look past the status quo (the SQWs), the expense of past major commitments (like the CRL) and the implications of significant financing decisions - like removal of the regional fuel tax.

Our proposals for dealing with the shortfall look even more relevant and we will be appropriately revising them for submission in response to the Mayor’s proposals. Wayne Brown is doing his best but we have consistently said the Auckland structure is not fit for purpose and only legislation can fix that. As the government is planning changes which will affect Auckland materially (e.g. the 3 waters replacement and RMA replacement legislation) we will keep reminding them of their commitment to localism and delegation of authority to communities to ensure ratepayers funding is not being wasted and is well directed at the local level (where the rubber currently meets the potholes 😊).

Recall elections

With growing talk of enthusiasm for a four year electoral term we must never lose sight of the value of recall elections in providing ongoing accountability for the decisions and actions (or the lack of these) of elected representatives. [Recall elections](#) allow for the benefits and cost savings from having good people continue in office and let voters decide when elected representatives have failed to perform and need to go. Opponents have been allowed to

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give too much weight to the hypothetical spectre of abuse of the recall petition process – when prudent checks and balances are available to minimise that risk.

Road maintenance and sealing

Recently we have also put effort into supporting calls for better practices in road management by AT and increased funding to maintain and seal Rodney's 650km of unsealed roads.

This has included a [presentation to the AT Board](#).

Our new Rodney Local Board has also allocated some of our Transport Targeted Rate to improving our terrible roads, so hats off to them for finally recognising that is what voters want.

As an aside, our new board have had a year now and are working with much more openness and engagement – thank you!

Our Councillor Greg Sayers has argued strongly for more funding in the new Regional Transport Plan and Mayor Brown recognises the problem, so we look forward to more work on our unsealed roads in future.

Planning

One of the major weaknesses in the governance and management of Auckland has been its failure to implement comprehensive and integrated planning and management of development across the region. Despite the initial legislative advantages of requirements to produce and follow the necessary plans these have not been prepared with the level of resource allocation detail and infrastructure identification necessary, with the consequence that much development has been fragmented, controversial and badly timed. While ahead of other TA's in many ways, Auckland has wasted opportunities to put down markers for excellence in planning and implementation.

Sadly, Auckland lacks an overall plan across its different geographic areas for water management beyond the limited remits of Watercare, Auckland Transport and Healthy Waters who operate independently and can't share funding and resources to get things done on the ground.

Auckland has failed to develop and implement the planning necessary to provide resilience in the face of climate change, integrate infrastructure planning with Government Agencies (like schools) nor had strength to ensure infrastructure development precedes its use. It has taken some significant weather events to awaken this realisation and we hope that under a new mayor and new government things will change for the better - so that developers are supported and encouraged along agreed pathways rather than fought and contested in proposing any new developments.



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The need for Localism

I have written at length before on this (and here again!), but Rodney's lack of road maintenance and sealing is not anyone's "fault". It's the result of a long combination of national and local funding, policy and political choices and arrangements that have prioritised spending away from road maintenance and road sealing and in favour of more urban or politically "iconic" spending preferences. That all stems from how AC was formed and structured under relevant legislation and has been exaggerated by political interests seeking greater centralization and control and their preferred particular outcomes.

NAG has consistently argued for better and more democratic governance that would promote Community Empowerment, localism, devolution, accountability and responsibility (to locals), fairer representation [e.g. Recall elections and longer terms, subdivision changes to fairly recognize rural interests] and opposing the three waters proposals .

Road maintenance and sealing has never been about having enough money. We have shown that AC sits on more than enough unspent Regional Fuel Tax money every year to fund Rodney's road maintenance, improvement and Sealing programme.

As with national government spending, politicians don't allocate funds to their most profitable uses, but to "hot" political issues (often social) that motivate voters. Investment is not judged on returns, but on "polls", "likes" and "followers".

So rather than justifying investments by identifying the future cash flows that will be used to pay for them, politicians prioritise operational and investment spending on what revenues they have, how much they can borrow, perceived voter need, and who they have to keep happy. Proper water and roading infrastructure is taken for granted and not "sexy" so it misses out on spending prioritization.

The result is a never-ending demand for more revenue to maintain or replace assets they could not afford and should not have afforded, frequent neglect of basic assets and facilities that were needed, inability to meet promises, and a resulting disenchantment of voters who finally replace the government - and repeat the process.

We know that the alternative more distributed (local) decision making will not necessarily be more efficient, less wasteful, or achieve any great central purpose, but it will give people what they want and that they chose – one of the key elements of democracy - as opposed to a system of dictatorship by the majority.

Adam Smith's "invisible hand" was not a market concept, but a social one that advocated for better overall social outcomes from a system where lots of people act in their own interests (respecting others of course) than from one where a few "wise" people act centrally to coerce others ("we know best what's good for you").

Some centralised decision-making benefits everyone (e.g. national defence, law and order, social safety nets) so in practice we strive for a balance between these extremes which is workable and recognizes the value of the commons for everyone.

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In NZ there is much written to show we are relatively overcentralized (too much government (national and local) spending is done by central government). In Auckland amalgamation has produced control by a majority of urban-focused representatives.

AC is underfunded in relation to service obligations and expectations and the core council urban majority (quite reasonably) are looking after what they think will get them publicity and votes and less concerned about rural people, communities and their needs. [Experience has confirmed Rodney ratepayer's valid concerns about the effects of amalgamating 40% of AC's area and 5% of its people into an urban-centric council]

As usual, some protection is needed for rural minorities in an urban centric majority rules system. We (NAG) see it as important to keep arguing for system and procedure changes that will deliver that.

Funding for NAG

As always we are very grateful for the contributions we receive to help us meet our limited expenses, particularly from the regular contributors who are our strongest supporters. Thank you again!

We want to get our Billboard campaign going again, and it would be good to advertise our messaging to have more people engaged in the representation process – so if you can spare a few dollars it will be gratefully received and well spent!

Donations to NAGs Bank Account ASB WW **12 3095 0233547 00**

Comments to northernactiongroup@gmail.com

Want to help? Join NAG, <https://mailchi.mp/a06a70fcda9a/registration-page>

Its Free! - and it **won't** cost you 😊

Finally, from me. Very Best wishes to all of you and sincerest thanks again to all of our committee and supporters who keep NAG going. We depend on you and you are us.

Have a Very Merry Christmas and Best wishes for a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

Bill Foster
Chairman
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