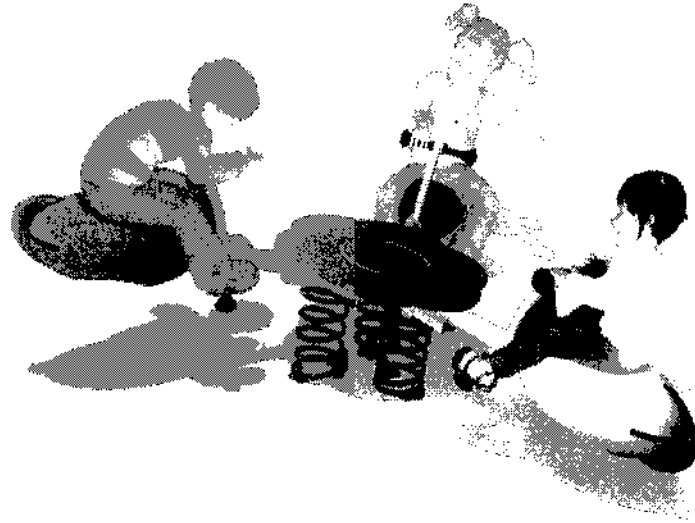


BLAZER SEESAW



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**Report on Attendance at the
Local Government New Zealand Conference 2007
Investing in our Future**



The conference, hosted by the Dunedin City Council, used the City's Town Hall facilities to hold all the events in, except for the Conference Dinner. This proved to be an ideal facility, comprising the main auditorium for the main presentations which involved all the delegates (in excess of 500), a smaller auditorium for large groups but not everyone, and a host of smaller rooms of varying sizes for the workshop sessions. Worth noting, a smaller City, like Dunedin, has the benefit of the hotel accommodation being within easy walking distance of the Town Hall. Tea and Lunch breaks were accommodated in the main auditorium and this ensured efficient flow of the large numbers in a restricted time frame. An important part of the Conference Planning allowed longish breaks (30-40 min for tea breaks, 90 min for lunch). This took the 'rush' out of the conference and allowed time for meaningful networking and talking to delegates from other Councils. The organisation was superb, and seemingly trouble free.

The official opening was highlighted by His Worship, The Mayor of Dunedin, Peter Chin, singing the Dunedin City theme song. This was taken on board by the delegates as being a very sound precedent for all Mayors throughout the Country to adopt a City song, to be sung on such occasions as the opening of Council meetings and formal occasions. One of the beneficial results, it was felt, would importantly be the improvement of Mayors singing voices across the Nation. On a more serious note, the Honourable Mark Burton, Minister of Local Government, wished the conference well on its deliberations which included such important issues as the Rates Enquiry, sustainability and global warming.

Sir Michael Lyons – Adviser to the British Government on Local Government financial sources, was the first keynote speaker, followed by a breakout session. His address was based on his experience from a three year investigation into the funding of local government in Great Britain. If householders are to benefit from a reduced rates taxation, a change in the way we think at local and national level has to take place in order to achieve an improved sharing of local government funding from local and central government sources. There needs to be seen a fairness in the taxation system in the split between land taxation versus other sources. He gave examples of the existing balance in the British model. Rates from a tax on land only account for 15% of the total to fund Councils. Government grants, account for a significant 19%, a police grant of 3% is given and other grant sources make up 26%. A significant contribution of 12% comes from user pays on fees and charges for specific services and applications for development.

To achieve community satisfaction there has to be an accepted balance between central and local government decision making. To achieve this local government needs to get better at engaging with the community. He went on to focus on the role of local government, its origins and core role in shaping communities and providing services: the complexities involved in understanding the needs and preferences of communities and debate on what can, and can not, be afforded. The role of elected representatives, in giving good leadership, in looking for solutions outside the square is important for innovative solutions to difficult problems. His address was both timely and helpful in the current debate New Zealand local government is having with central government and our communities.

Rob White – New Zealand Wine Company Spoke about Carbon Neutral Trading. His address centred on sustainable environmental practices that give a return to the shareholders and the local community. As a major exporter of wine to the UK, New Zealand, while able to produce product significantly more efficiently than in the UK and Europe, still has the perception of being carbon inefficient because of the ‘food miles’ we are from the market on the other side of the world. There has thus arisen a strong anti New Zealand produce lobby in order to protect their own markets. With bulk packaging and handling procedures, smart thinking and efficiencies of scale, the NZ Wine Company can deliver product into the UK stores with a significantly smaller carbon footprint than the local product, and at a lower price. Because of the global warming concerns being addressed in UK, and the requirement to comply with a carbon footprint grading, which is displayed on the product stocked on the shelves in stores, this is working in New Zealand’s favour. The New Zealand Wine Company has been successful in being the first NZ winery to become carbon zero. This has been achieved by working in closely with Landcare Research to improve land operation growing and harvesting practices. Being more fuel efficient with machinery and transport reduces energy usage significantly. The shipping carton was re-designed to better nest the bottles and achieve a smaller carton. They use a power supplier that has minimised its carbon rating (Meridian). Despite the prejudices that New Zealand faces with its distant trading partners, the carbon rating of our export products will work significantly in our favour where we have the opportunity to be smarter and more carbon efficient than the energy hungry practices utilised because of the UK and European climate. This address was enlightening and gives hope for a long-term sustainable export industry for New Zealand, where we use the carbon rating to our advantage in a carbon sensitive overseas market.

John Key – Leader of the National Party addressed the conference on the important challenge ahead, (the next 10 years) for local and central government to build the infrastructure required for a sustainable and prosperous future for the country. He touched on the need for a revision of the current financing system of local government and relief on residential taxing. His address acknowledged the financial burden being placed on local government from regulative demands imposed by central government. He gave the example where small communities are being expected to meet extraordinary, and unreasonable, costs to upgrade their water supply standards to levels that achieve little for the community, and the community cannot afford.

Break-out Session based on Sir Michael Lyons presentation for improved efficiencies in local government funding and operation. Points raised in the workshop groups were such things as the need for Councils to stimulate good debate on community issues, partnershiping such as with Telecom for broadbanding, Police for safer communities, and Iwi for cultural and social stability. It was generally agreed, that because of the Local Government Act, and the LTCCP process, NZ is reasonably good at ‘place-shaping’ and providing a ‘convenor’ role with service providers. On the other hand it was felt that consultation between central and local government needs to improve, partly through improved talking with government agencies. Looking at themselves it was suggested that Councils could be more inspirational in consulting with their communities. The point about financially unsustainable standards (eg water supply) being imposed on Councils needs to be flexible, recognising the difference in ability to pay between rural and urban, small and large, communities.

Creating Efficiencies Workshop explored the governance models that best achieve efficiencies for the supply of local government services. This was about partnershiping between Councils and other agencies, be they private or public enterprises, government, Council owned organisations or neighbouring local authorities. This is about looking at how to do more for less, and choosing the right projects. With revenue streams rising at a slower rate than costs (eg bitchumen) it is becoming increasingly difficult for local authorities to

maintain the rate of maintenance, and provision of infrastructure, when relying mostly on rate increases limited to acceptable levels of increase.

The concept of Councils entering into collaborative partnerships to share services or infrastructural provision leads to cost savings through efficiencies of scale. Such things as water supply schemes, sewerage, roading and neighbouring land use decisions being made collaboratively across local authority boundaries results in better planning and cost savings. More importantly, decisions are not made in isolation with the risk of creating expensive difficulties for neighbouring local authorities.

During this workshop it brought to mind the recent representation to the Waitakere City, from Rodney, regarding the mounting problems of sewage disposal in Kumeu, Huapai and Waimauku. With Watercare's system reaching close to capacity, the long-term needs of an expanding Waitakere City may be forced into revising a look at a Nor-Western treatment plant alternative. To do this through a partnership deal with Rodney Council seems sensible.

The success of partnershiping relies on the correct balance of elected representatives, and officers, working together. The governance issues of setting up partnership arrangements properly, with well defined objectives and contractual arrangements was emphasised as being most important to avoid confusion and disagreement on the sharing of costs and the benefits provided to each party by the facility or service being built. It is thus important to consider the 'vehicle' by which a partnership is to be set up. Such things as CCTOs (Council Controlled Trading Organisations), Trusts (which Waitakere has used very successfully), a LATE or similar independent bodies that looks after all the participating partners impartially and evenly. Partnerships in the public sector with Health organisations, education, the police and community service organisations were touched upon as being potential partners for local authorities to get leverage that ends up with a better, and more cost effective delivery of community services. There was considerably more covered than reported here and it was a most interesting and valuable workshop. A lot of what was covered was directly relevant to much of what this City is already doing and was thus comforting to have the reinforcement afforded by this workshop.

Sherri Torjman – Vice- President of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy gave a keynote address, followed by a breakout session, on how communities can be made stronger and safer through 'Engagement' and 'Inclusion'. The address was based on successful models that have been developed in Canada, and to a large degree, considered to be relevant to the NZ scene. Each issue being tackled firstly needs to identify who the 'engagement' should take place with. Is it a small group or a whole community? Who should 'inclusion' cover? Do the issues directly, or indirectly, include such organisations and community representatives as housing, employers, youth, roading, transport, etc. The art of involving interested parties to actively participate is seen as a key element to obtaining successful community outcomes. One simple, but very successful way of getting people together was around meal times. The end of the day being the better time when working people have knocked off from work and would normally be stopping for a meal break before, possibly before going out to an evening engagement. One problem faced in modern western society, to get people involved in community issues, is the increasingly busy lives we all live. By providing a light meal, in conjunction with a meeting, people will find time to attend because it fits in with their need to have a meal break. It was found that young people responded well to the inducement of food. It is usually hard to involve young people due to the barriers age, shyness and uncertainty are engendered in their thinking. It is often important to go this extra distance to entice young people to participate because there are often issues relevant to their interests.

Effective Community Boards Workshop proved to be most interesting and informative. Some really good and effective models of successful Council/Community Board partnerships were discussed. The most successful models are mostly in the South Island, Christchurch City being one and rural communities, where the elected representatives cover small populations over large areas. In these examples the Community Boards exercise considerable autonomy

under quite far reaching delegations, for decision making, and expenditure. This leaves the Councils free to concentrate on the more central issues of governance, revenue generation, planning and strategy. What came through very clearly, was that without an appropriate level of delegation, (that would vary from local authority to local authority), Community Boards could not operate properly and effectively fulfil their role of 'community advocate' and responding to community needs without being given the tools to carry out their functions. Valuable ideas and material came out of this workshop and which is relevant to the evolving role of Community Boards in this City.

David Shand – Chair of the Local Government Rates Inquiry informed the conference on the work that had been covered in their brief and that the report was nearly ready for release. They extended their enquiries beyond public submissions only and looked at what practices government departments followed for forecasting their funding needs. One of the costs imposed on local government by central government, and the Panel seem to be critical of, is the cost involved around the annual round of Annual Plan and LTCCP submissions. The Panel's enquiries found no government departments did much more than predictions which looked only twelve months ahead, and then it was very limited, roading appeared to be one of the few areas where serious forecasts were made, and mostly only a year ahead. We were told to 'watch this space' but not to expect wholesale changes to the current methods of rating available to local authorities. The report must be ready for release at any time now.

Mayor Dick Hubbard on Climate Change reported on his attendance to the Kyoto Conference, and the lessons for local authorities to take on board. Climate change will bring larger and more frequent flooding that will impact on where and how we locate low-lying developments. Drought in other areas will affect rural, and some municipal, water supplies. Sea rises will increase sea inundation and coastal erosion, with expensive damage in areas of low-lying coastal development. Even cliff top properties will be seriously placed at risk from the undermining erosion of the sea. Civil Defence will become more active and need to respond in different ways to events, which will change in severity and extent. What we need to do now is focus on reducing carbon emissions, be more energy efficient, conserve our resources, such as water and bush cover. We need to build better insulated, and energy efficient, houses, shopping areas and offices. Councils need to start by setting the example of well designed offices for themselves, operate low energy transport pools, pay attention to public transport and minimising travel distances between work and home. The address was both very well presented, being entertaining, but containing a most important and serious message.

Sector Meetings were held in the concluding hours of the Conference. The Municipal Sector meeting was addressed by the Honourable Annette King, Minister of Police and Transport. Her address covered the recent increase, by 1250, of more front line and community police. The focus for placement would be in the metropolitan areas where most crime occurs. She touched on the effectiveness of Alcohol Bans in CBDs and other appropriate locations. The ongoing problem of graffiti and efforts to make places, like Auckland, graffiti free with the setting up of the 'Auckland Regional Authority Graffiti Group'. The emerging growth of youth gangs (the so called 'Alphabet Gangs'), who are well structured and highly mobile, are producing a particular challenge to police. Combating boy racers needs close co-operation between the Police and Local Authorities. The Government is looking at changes to a graduated licence system that places more controls on offending drivers.

Moves are in hand to reorganise the methods of distributing roading funds, in conjunction with local authorities, to better apply funds where the greatest priorities exist. It is proposed that Local Authorities will have a greater say in major roading plans within their areas. There are also moves to apply all road taxes collected back into roading.

Local Government New Zealand Annual General Meeting. This was most interesting to sit in on. As a first time observer, I was fascinated with the security and protocols adopted for the running of the meeting. Each promoter, and then the floor spoke to, each remit briefly. The voting system was by electronic means, each Council having one vote under strict registration rules. Observers came under the same strict enrolment controls, and entry into the voting hall was by card only. It was certainly an experience that the general public does not have an opportunity to see, but if they did I am sure they would be impressed how this part of our democratic process operates.

Summing up by President Basil Morrison recapped on the main outcomes of the conference, which are worth summarising here.

The single largest problem facing Local Government is the increasing community expectations with a reluctance, or difficulty to pay. The Rates Inquiry may give help to this dilemma.

Climate change is presenting a long-term problem that needs to be addressed now. CEOs recognise the need to provide good building environments to attract good staff. Leaky homes are a significant issue for local authorities and there is a pressing need for government to take some financial responsibility to fix the problem.

He extended a warm welcome to all present to next year's conference to be held in Rotorua.

It will be hard pressed to be better than this one. On behalf of the Community Boards a most grateful thanks is extended, for the honour to attend, such a worthwhile and informative Conference.

Graeme Barnard

Community Board Conference Delegate