

Empowering Communities

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Planning at local government level has increasingly become a sterile mode of formalised proposal and reaction. The Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), as enabling legislation, has enabled a privileged form of development, characterised by rules based planning, technical and legal argument and well funded council and developer projects. The community has often suffered from the process and the outcome.

Large areas of coastline and scenic lakeshore are witness to the ability of developers to change the nature of “place” from that which generations of settlers, residents and visitors valued for its quiet and peaceful environment. Reports by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (*Working together in Thames-Coromandel: Guidelines for community planning*, November 2005), and the Environmental Defence Society (*Castles in the Sand: what’s happening to the NZ coast*, Raewyn Peart 2009) have detailed the long term impacts of such development but still it continues. Why is it still happening? What can existing communities do to halt the onslaught?

I believe it is because communities do not have the opportunity to decide for themselves how they will relate to that landscape and to each other as an identifiable “living place”.

Their roles are largely limited to that of objection and opposition and are often criticised as NIMBY (not in my backyard). Sometimes they do not even get the opportunity to object because planning instruments have eliminated that right! For example, in my immediate neighbourhood, new cell phone towers are springing up ready for the Rugby World Cup in 2011, and the Department of Corrections are planning a large new community correctional facility next to a residential area. All permitted within existing zoning and without consultation.

Similarly, with the myriad of proposed wind and hydro power schemes on South Island rivers and grandiose plans by irrigation enterprises to capture the fresh water resources in Canterbury, small communities are left to mount defences against large well-funded and resourced corporations to retain their valued lifestyles and places. The recent decision of the Environment Court in the Meridian Project Hayes Central Otago Wind Farm case is a rare victory for community-organised rearguard action.

The Long Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP) process under the Local Government Act 2002 should have given some cause for optimism that community aspirations would be taken into account. Yet again Councils have promoted their own agendas and communities are limited to commenting on Council-derived proposals. In Christchurch, community and school pools have been closed because of lack of funding and school children

bussed around the city (with the resulting CO2 emissions) to meet the demands of a Council community facilities strategy. Neighbourhood planning has been reduced (along with local Community Board input) to street upgrades and beautification schemes.

But there may be some hope for communities with the rise of initiatives for community transitions and resilience. This is grassroots planning that brings together residents to develop a vision of a more sustainable community that functions to meet the needs of local people now and into the future, when resources such as water and oil may run short. In Canterbury, Transition Towns such as Lincoln (through the Lincoln Envirotown Trust) and Lyttelton (Project Lyttelton) are delivering community sponsored programmes with the aid of committed volunteers and small amounts of grants. In Lincoln, there is a well used Community garden, and Lyttelton boasts a renowned Farmers Market, Midwinter festival and a Timebank. This positive community development approach focuses on:

- Building neighbourhood support through meetings and events
- Skills and resource sharing
- Defined small neighbourhood projects
- Social get-togethers to build trust and appreciation for local efforts.

In Roimata, where I live, the Heathcote (Ōpāwaho) River forms a defined boundary and a valued community asset for residents. This is becoming the focus for some of the neighbourhood and plans are being developed for restoration of the river and riverside. A positive approach to neighbourhood planning, skill building and information for good management, can be complemented by Council and ECan input and infrastructure planning.

I have seen how this can work through a community based initiative in West Auckland (Project Whau) that I co-founded and co-ordinated as a community based planner from 2000 to 2004. In 5 years, the community group that I and others organised

- planted 5000 trees on 4 public reserves
- advised and worked with homeowners on the care of the small streams that ran through their backyards
- participated in monitoring of industrial water discharges
- ran water quality monitoring groups at 9 schools through the catchment
- involved churches, community and sporting groups in regular planting and clean-up events
- produced a very popular booklet about the river and its tributaries and an award winning video
- and, most importantly, encouraged people to see their local river as not just dirty, brown and polluted but as a valued “place” for community interaction and recreation

All this happened with the assistance of local council and some local businesses.

Community planning is possible, but it requires recognition and support from local authorities. Through joint action, it can help bring about a renewed sense of place-making, community ownership and pride as the community identifies with its local history and landscape. It suggests that this is what makes up our profound local sense of place. It needs to be encouraged.

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