



In the second semester of 2011 the third year Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning students taking the Professional Practice course (SOC1 314) were set an assignment to write a short, topical article of local interest. This related directly to the content of the course SOC1 314, which provides a critical study of issues in the provision of professional services in environmental planning, design, social sciences, tourism, sport and recreation. As part of the assessment the articles were subject to the LPR review processes.

UNDIE 500 – and how planners could do it better!

By Lauren Shaw

Most New Zealanders are familiar with the cultural affair that is the 'Undie 500', mainly because of the events that unfold as a result of main attractions. Images of riot police, burning couches and drunken behaviour are normally the first that flash to mind. For those that aren't aware, or thought it was just about the couch burning and mob scenes, the Undie



Figure 1 - Undie 500 participants show off their "Double Brown" themed van

500 is actually a yearly tradition (when allowed to run) that is well entrenched into the student culture of Canterbury and Otago Universities.

Originally the Undie 500 was a convoy of vehicles that travelled to Dunedin in support of the Canterbury team in the Marlowe Cup Rugby match which was played between the Canterbury Engineers

XV and Otago Surveyors XV. It came into its own after the suggestion to purchase a vehicle for under \$500 come into effect.(ODT,2011). The decorated vans then proceed to Dunedin and, like any good road trip, had toilet and refreshment breaks en-route - they just happened to be at the many pubs along the way. Despite having been run since the early 1980s by ENSOC (The University of Canterbury Engineering Society), the event has only been heavily documented in the years that violent scenes unfolded in North Dunedin streets. "The Undie 500 brought disorder to Castle St in 2006, involving riot police, arrests and fires, and after the arrival of the 2007 rally, 69 people were arrested, 70 fires set and riot police were again required to disperse the crowds. There were similar problems the next year, and while a 2009 rally was rebranded by 'Ensoc' as a charity drive, Castle St again descended into disorder, with 67 people arrested over two nights of partying" (ODT, 2009).

It was a different story in 2010 when for the first time students were heralded as champions due to their involvement in the Christchurch recovery where they used all their resources to shovel silt instead of beers.

In response to the escalation in behavior the NZ Herald (2006) reported that a liquor ban was to be imposed on the main student area over the events weekend (NZ Herald,2006). This led to many arrests in that and subsequent years for breaches of the ban. However, it is interesting to note that many of the people arrested over the years have been non students. The anti-social



behavior of these people has been noticed since 2006 when “others driving cars not associated with the event began traveling to Dunedin concurrently and rioting.”(Porteous, 2009)

Figure 2 - Riot police face off against revellers as students watch

There was some scepticism that the riots were not as a result of the Undie participants and that it was the “hangers on” that got out of control.

There is also a suggestion that the Council, in collaboration with the general media, facilitated the riots in order to get the event permanently banned. There are also those that believe the media are simply using sensationalism in order to create a bigger story than there really is. Reporters in the city who talked to both students as well as older residents, agreed that the media coverage shown across the country was blown out of proportion and that it was only a very small proportion of people that acted in such a manner. The NZ Herald reported (2009) Dunedin residents as saying that the media sensationalises the event by focusing on the very small percentage of students that misbehave.

This is where planners need to ask themselves what the lessons are here and what can be learned from this.

It seems that the initial stages of each rally, controlled by ENSOC, are well run. ENSOC set out rules for participants and check to make sure all the cars have a sober driver and WOF and that police follow the convoy for safety reasons. Issues arise when, after four or more hours of drinking, the party rolls into Dunedin. The problems arise as there is no separation of participants and general public, combined with the fact that there is no event to go to or other entertainment provided. If planners ruled the world I believe that the Undie 500 would be a shining success - much like the way the city has embraced the traveling convoy of people headed to Dunedin in order to have fun with their friends and watch a rugby game... sound familiar to anyone?

The Rugby World Cup is an example of how things can go well in Dunedin with a little

preparation and accommodating. The city embraced that event with vigor. Obviously the undie event is on a smaller scale to the World Cup and brings in less revenue but it was



Figure 3 - Participants in the 2008 'Rebel' Undie 500

evident in the opening weekend of the Cup that Dunedin could deliver fun and safe events if it tried. According to the Council, events went as planned. "The local street entertainment proved to be a great success and contributed to a great feeling in the City. At a planning and infrastructure level, our street

cleaning, traffic management and public transport provisions all worked well" (DCC, 2011). This leads many to believe that the Undie 500 could be easily contained and things could be markedly different if there was more security, exclusivity and entertainment associated with undie weekend. *"In today's entertainment society, event management must also take into account television and other media audiences. No longer are events just staged. They must be carefully planned, packaged, and sold"* (Brown, Sutton and Duff, 1993).

This event management mantra is a sound basis for many apparently disparate events. For example the Undie 500 could be managed in a similar way to the Rugby World Cup. In the latter case the council worked in the interests of businesses and other 'respectable' sectors of the community but in the case of the Undie 500 they are denying the student community an outlet.

I would recommend that the same care go into the arrangements for Undie as goes into preparing for other events. In particular the Council should address issues of entertainment, exclusivity and security. There could be a site or camping ground booked for the two nights of the event with access only available to Otago and Canterbury Undie 500 registered students. This may solve the "hanger on" dilemma since making it an exclusive event that requires prior planning or even ticket purchasing would ensure that non-students were denied entry. Inside the ground an event, concert or other fixture would be popular with the attendees and would keep the masses entertained. A fire pit could also be set up (under the watchful eye of the fire brigade) away from the action for anyone wanting to take a break if the excitement gets too much or for anyone wanting to dispose of household furniture. Locked gates and guards would stop any drunk driving and mobs getting in or out of the venue. It is generally felt among the student community that if there was some accountability (with tickets and registering participants) that there would be a change in the dynamic and people would be less likely to cause trouble.

Despite all the problems that have marred the event in the past the event will still go ahead in the years to come. In 2011 they took on the criticism of previous years and organised a party at the Dunedin end. In line with the roots of the event, the participants enjoyed a

rugby game at the end of the day. The All Blacks Rugby World Cup fixture versus Japan was screened on a big projector at the final venue location, which was kept a secret until the last minute. (ENSOC 11) As well as the game ENSOC promoted in their communication to participants that there was also going to be “cheap drinks and plenty of kai then a big party at the final destination with live bands & DJs rocking till late”.

The conclusion of all of this is that it seems that students are fairly adamant about keeping this 30 plus year tradition alive and that ensuring events like these are safe require good collaborative links between local authorities, the police and the universities too. 2011 brought a new year and a new attempt at getting the Undie 500 convoy down south. Although details were sketchy it seems they are beginning to take the criticism of the past into consideration when organising the event. So in the years to come if you happen to be on State Highway One between Christchurch and Dunedin keep your eyes peeled for some witty and politically incorrect vans and as you pass them realise you are witnessing tradition and New Zealand university culture in action.

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Photo References:

Figure 1 – "Undie 500 participants show off their 'Double Brown' themed van". Retrieved 1st September from <http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/73648/cops-cracking-down-undie-500>

Figure 2 – "Riot police face off against revellers as students watch". Retrieved 1st September from <http://newzeelend.wordpress.com/2009/09/12/intellectually-stunted-nz-students-riot-again/>

Figure 3 – "Participants in the 2008 'Rebel' Undie 500". Retrieved 1st September from <http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/19019/rogue-undie-500-arrives-pics>