

Roads and Independent representatives

With the run up to the local body elections there have been a lot of comments on social media as people and their supporters run for office. For Rodney the main topics currently seem to be the state of our roads and the way the local board is, or should be, run.

I don't normally comment on social media or respond there to criticisms, as its not really a constructive forum for reasoned discussion, but mainly just used by people for venting, stating uninformed opinions, or slanging off at others. So this is a longer piece for people who want to think about the underlying concerns.

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 written extensively on this and 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 the 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 defense, 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.

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 who are 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 4% of its people into an urban-centric council]

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

So, we don't think that criticizing AC for its lack of spending on roads in Rodney should be a reason we have missed out on road funding, or that we need to agree with the Mayor and GB's voting block of urban councillors' proposals for AC's continual rate rises in order to get more money for Rodney. That kind of "scratch my back" venal thinking just leads to acceptance of bribery and patronage as the norm.

Nor do we need local board members to support AC's policies that don't represent the views of Rodney's voters in order to win support for more resources for Rodney. The rural areas of Franklin and Rodney need to be treated fairly, not as afterthoughts. Cycleways in Auckland Central, the city rail link, light rail to the airport and tactical urbanism do nothing for Rodney.

The local board has worked hard to deliver within its limited remit to allocate spending on local services and assets. But it's political and representation mistake has been to follow its own block members agenda and not to recognize and support voters calls for better roading, and rates more focused on Rodney's needs (rather than AC's).

Seeing busses running around Warkworth empty, and a "temporary" ParknRide, just shouts "waste!" to local ratepayers. They would have been happy with a restoration of some of the Transport Targeted Rate to road sealing and some compromise needed to be shown. Any resultant delay to the bus and footpath projects the Board wanted would not have materially affected the community (especially when people were going nowhere during

Covid lockdowns.) Taxis or vouchers would have been better ways to spend to address any disadvantaged voters transport needs. Roads are the arteries of the region. We need them smooth and functioning well to avoid a regional heart attack.

Ideological and block voting with secrecy (closed workshops and pre-deciding outcomes) are antithetical to an open, representative, and community inclusive RLB. Independent candidates who support open discussions and decision making are needed to restore confidence. That is why NAG opposes block or party affiliation and supports independents.

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