



# ***The Northern Action Group Incorporated***

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## **Christmas Newsletter: December 2020**

Dear Member/Supporter,

### **A Covid19 Year**

It's a while now since our last Newsletter and probably a good opportunity to update you all on what your committee has been up to since our AGM.

2020 has been a distressing year for all, and we would like to say a special thanks to those members and supporters who have continued to contribute funding during the pandemic, and to support us as the new committee keeps working for better outcomes for the North Rodney communities!

The election has brought us a continuation of the Labour government in a stronger position, and although we got some indications of support from parties during the campaign to help with North Rodney's separation through a referendum approach, there does not appear to be real appetite for any separation during the current government's term – something for us to work on!

However, we are very lucky to have both Chris Penk, our local electorate MP, and Marja Lubeck, our local list MP, fully supportive of getting a fairer and better deal for Rodney. The recent alignment of the Kaipara ki Mahurangi electorate with the Rodney Local Board (RLB) area strengthens the ability of all parties – MPs, Councillor, Local Board members and community groups - to work together for better outcomes for the area. This may not address or fix the structural deficiencies that prevent Auckland Council from working efficiently and effectively for all ratepayers, but it is good news for Rodney people.

With our unsuccessful attempt to use the Local Government Act processes to get North Rodney out of the not-so-super-city behind us, we are focused on a range of things that can make smaller, but nonetheless effective, improvements as we garner support for another crack at responsible autonomy.

This includes the following ongoing activities:

### **Billboard campaign**

You may have seen our billboards against the Dome landfill proposal and some recent ones coming up drawing attention to the disastrous situation of Rodney's unsealed roads. We hope to use the opportunity to continue to highlight topics of importance to the community where Rodney is not getting a fair deal. Many thanks to Grant McLachlan for ideas and printing and Maury and his team for installation and changes. While costs are small again we thank our supporters for helping us to continue this activity.

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## **Localism: the LGNZ report**

NAG's submission to the Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) discussion paper called "Reinvigorating local democracy: The case for localising power and decision-making to Councils and communities" was well received and we are quoted several times in the subsequent report. [<https://www.lgnz.co.nz/assets/Enhancing-Democratic-Well-being-Feedback-on-Reinvigorating-Local-Democracy-1.pdf>]

However, coming out just before the elections, the report does not appear to have attracted significant attention, and is unlikely to advance the cause for devolution much. Although re-balancing the relationship between central and local government is needed, it's far from clear that a large local authority like Auckland Council (which does not fit the traditional small Council model, the legislation is framed around) is "fit for purpose" to benefit from any likely changes. All AC seems to be looking for is more money from Government to prop up its outstanding infrastructure deficit!

We said a year ago that communities might be prepared to pay a little more in rates for any extra cost associated with having their own autonomy. The sad irony and disappointment is that level of rate increases AC is now contemplating to bridge it's exploding deficit is way higher than the largest amount the Local Government Commission could dream up as necessary to make a Rodney Unitary Authority self-sufficient (the basis on which they said that a Rodney Unitary Authority was not a practicable option).

It's worth repeating what our localism submission said, since it's just as true now as it was a year ago:

- the Electoral Act and the Local Electoral Act need review to address the need for fair representation by and for communities, and the Local Government Act needs updating and reform to recognise:
  - more relevant funding options;
  - appropriate governance structures for large Councils (Auckland is unique, but regional unitary authorities might be more relevant if they were properly structured and managed to reflect the needs and roles of communities in local governance);
  - recall provisions (to remove bad electoral choices); and
  - greater flexibility in reorganisations to respond and adapt to changing communities.

## **Electorate boundary changes.**

We noted these before the end of last year and spoke to the Commission in February. Our submissions were well received. However, the Commission preferred the new name of "Kaipara ki Mahurangi" to the traditional alternative of "Rodney" which we proposed - supported by most people who made submissions.



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The experience was also helpful as it has supported our background work on the proposals to review and change the subdivisions within the Rodney local board area.

## **Recall Elections**

It was great to have the Auckland Ratepayers Alliance and the New Zealand Taxpayers Union collaborating with us on this call for recall elections - which remains a continuing campaign. [[https://www.taxpayers.org.nz/recall\\_paper](https://www.taxpayers.org.nz/recall_paper)]

With Tauranga, Wellington and Invercargill Councils in the news lately, it's worth reminding people that the best response to dysfunctional Councils is not wasting taxpayer money on central government investigations and appointment of Commissioners!

There will always be some conflicts and problems in some of the local Councils or Board (people being people). Some would say that is democracy in action.

Centralising decisions (fewer Councils) is not the democratic answer. It just concentrates the risks of bad decision-making; reduces representation; increases the disconnect between decision makers and those who elect them, and encourages wasteful (iconic) spending because accountability is less direct. Ratepayers choose their representatives and if they make bad choices or pick people who can't work together they need to be able to change them!!

## **RLB subdivision boundary review**

A lot of time has been put in recently, supported by our Councillor Greg Sayers, on the proposal to review representation with the Rodney Local Board area in time for the 2022 elections. AC's Governing Body decided back in February not to have a review until it was compulsory for the 2025 elections, and any decision to do so must be made before March next year, so this became a priority.

50% of the ratepayers in the Rodney Local Board area are either rural or in rural communities. The current subdivision structure, being centered around small urban areas, distributes rural representation across them so that the balance is not fairly reflected in the make-up of the Local Board membership.

Mahurangi Matters has picked up the story

[<https://m.localmatters.co.nz/news/41000-call-rodney-board-subdivision-boundary-change.html>] and – if interested - you can see our submission here.

[<http://nag.org.nz/NAG%20subdivision%20proposal%20document.pdf>]

What is important to understand, which is apparently not recognized in some of the responses, is that this is NOT in response to, or criticism of, the performance of any current Local Board members (good or bad), NOR whether or not Rodney is being treated fairly in resource allocations by the Governing Body.

It is addressed at ensuring compliance with the representation law - through a more focused, fair and balanced representation of the interest of rural and small urban

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ratepayers and residents – who have different needs for, use of, and thus interests in, the provision of local government services.

## **Regional Fuel Tax (RFT)**

Following up concerns about why committed road sealing funds to Rodney were cut, NAG has also worked with Greg Sayers to identify the rort being perpetrated on AC transport users who pay the RFT and expect it to be spent on designated transport projects. [<https://www.localmatters.co.nz/news/41006-sayers-blasts-council-misuse-of-regional-fuel-tax.html>]

Greg approached the Auditor General for a legal and accounting opinion and while AC is following the letter of the law and properly accounting for RFT funds, it is cunningly delaying commitment of those funds to designated transport projects in order to use the cash received in the meantime to offset it's dire operational funding needs (and we all know how desperate they are for revenue at the moment!).

If the amounts were trivial, this would not merit attention, but AC has diverted more than \$100 million dollars throughout the first two years of the scheme's operations and does not even have to credit the RFT reserve account with any interest for the use of the money (something they have to do with Targeted Rate funds).

Worse still, they have refused to provide any of this available money for the road sealing program (one of the designated RFT projects) which, by using local contractors, is "shovel ready", is not dependent on any other works, and could have proceeded without delay to the immediate benefit of Rodney road users.

## **AC Service Level Review**

In response to Local Government Commission recommendations following our High Court case, AC has been undertaking a review of service levels under its more general Governance Framework Review.

What this work has identified amidst all the waffle is something we all knew - that there are significant differences between Local Board areas in terms of the services and assets provided and the resources (funding) allocated to maintain, replace or develop them, and the provision of new assets or new services.

As expected, AC has no plans to significantly or quickly change from the status quo (since that would invite a "winners versus losers" controversy). The Review does not take any account of who "pays", only who "gets". The focus is on the allocation of Local Discretionary Income (LDI) to Local Boards - which does nothing to address infrastructure asset imbalances, and is anyway only a small proportion of the funding and resources ratepayers get back for their area from the Council.



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## **Landfill Submission**

NAG has agreed to take a stand opposing approval of the Dome landfill (as you have seen from our billboards) and I have made a personal submission to the Independent Commissioners hearing the application.

There is much to be said about the proper governance and management of the waste generation processing and disposal chain in Auckland. This hearing is unlikely to resolve the best way forward. AC has an overall responsibility for our Regional Environmental Commons and needs to play its part actively, rather than just participating passively as a responder to the private sector application.

NAG's position generally is that Rodney is not:

- a resource to be plundered by AC for its rates and resources;
- a costless beach and holiday destination for visitors and tourists who use (but don't pay for) facilities, or
- an "out of sight-out of mind" place where urban waste may be conveniently discarded at low cost.

So, lots of work in progress and still much work still to do on our aim of getting better democratic outcomes for the people of North Rodney. Let's all hope for some positive changes in the New Year.

As we welcome a hopefully Covid free year in 2021, let me take this opportunity to wish you all the best for the festive season and thank you again for your ongoing support!

We don't have any subscription of membership fee for NAG, but if you want to make a donation in the spirit of Christmas, I think you can see it will be well spent!

As Bill Townson commented last year, clawing back the loss of representation, respect, and voice in our local governance from the centralists' power and control was never going to be easy!

Yours sincerely

Bill Foster  
Chairman  
Northern Action Group Inc.

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

**Comments** to [northernactiongroup@gmail.com](mailto:northernactiongroup@gmail.com)

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