



2024 Auckland Council Representation Review:

Rodney Subdivision Boundaries

Improving compliance, equality and balance in representation

5 August 2024

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This Submission

We make this submission in support of the changes proposed and resolved for consultation by Auckland Council's (AC) Governing Body (GB).

We offer some comments in support of the conceptual change behind the proposal. We suggest some minor adjustments to boundaries that would address concerns we have heard expressed during the consultation period.

We comment on the various misrepresentations and scaremongering tactics that have been used by some people to encourage opposition to the proposed changes.

We wish to appear before the Joint Governance Working Party (JGWP) to speak to our submission.

Introduction

In December 2020 we provided a paper in support of a motion tabled by Rodney Councillor Greg Sayers, supported by our local MPs, seeking a review of the Rodney Local Board (RLB) area subdivision boundaries¹. The governing body deferred our proposal for consideration in the general review required every six years (in this case for the 2025 local body elections).

In preparation for the GB resolution for the public consultation required for 2024, we have been actively working with community groups to promote an understanding of the representation review process, the current non-compliance of the subdivisions in Rodney, and the proposed change in concept for interpreting communities of interest.

This has been challenging as, with the general level of apathy regarding participation in local authority elections and the process for these, it is perfectly natural and understandable for members of the public to be for the most part uninterested in engagement on these issues unless they feel disenfranchised by current subdivision arrangement or threatened in some way by proposals for change. In our opinion, the public at large, struggle to understand the difference between Wards and Local Board Areas and subdivisions, and Councillors and Local Board members.

Nonetheless we have been able to engage with some local community groups (Kaipara flats, Sandspit, Puhoi, Whangateau, Warkworth Area Liaison Group, NAG and LCA AGMs) and generally received appreciative support.

¹ https://infocouncil.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/Open/2020/12/GB_20201217_AGN_9669_AT_WEB.htm
(includes the paper <https://nag.org.nz/NAG%20Subdivision%20Paper.pdf>)

An on-line poll we have had running since August 2023 has only attracted 109 responses, but 98% support the changes.

The process

Our efforts have involved engaging with members of the Rodney local board and AC officials working on the review. We have been impressed with the level of understanding and support received from officials during the process. However, despite trying to raise the general level of public awareness since the middle of last year, we have been unable to engage formally with decision makers (the JGWP and RLB), to improve understanding of the change proposed, prior to opportunities afforded in the process for members of the public generally.

We understand that the intention of AC behind this process is to avoid lobbying or the promotion of special interests seeking to influence decision making by the JGWP and GB. However we note, as even the Chairperson of the JGWP commented during the public webinars, that elected members are significantly conflicted in having a strong vested interest in the process by which they are elected. Consequently they may find it difficult to be independent in their judgements about changes which could impact their chances of re-election.

We are pleased that the RLB has chosen to put aside potential conflicts and support and recognise the rural /urban basis of our proposal and recommended its adoption to the JGWP. The recommendation was supported by a narrow majority (5: 4) and modified the original proposal to maintain a perceived balance between North and South voting areas.

The Proposal

The subdivision boundary changes proposed for consultation by the governing body for the Rodney local board area are based on the concept proposed in 2020 of urban/rural communities of interest - as set out in our paper to the December 2020 GB meeting.

With the updated 2023 population numbers officials made minor changes from the original proposal which brought the Kumeu subdivision into compliance with the legislative population quota.

The split of the rural subdivision into two (North rural and South rural) subdivisions was recommended by the RLB to address concerns about a perceived potential imbalance between representation from the North and from South West Rodney and to encourage the election of representatives with more localised knowledge within such a large geographic area.

[This reflects the practical political reality of differences (policy and decision-making) between members representing the interests of either North Rodney or SW Rodney residents (or party voting “blocks” and independents) which were polarising in previous Rodney local boards and have tended to persist to some degree in the current local board. Differences between members, particularly over roads and transport spending, were instrumental in the review of concepts for deciding areas of representation.]

This split of the rural area necessarily introduces some arbitrariness as to the location of the boundary between North rural and South rural. However variations are possible to address local concerns which have been expressed about not splitting local communities for voting.

[It is important to recognise that with a diverse and dispersed population in Rodney - only half of which is lumped together in a few dominant communities - any subdivision of the Rodney district for voting purposes will produce boundaries with potential concerns from people affected by those boundary decisions, whether their perceptions are valid or not. (As we will see under the communities of interest discussion anything less than electing all members at large involves compromise.)]

Communities of Interest: Rodney is different

Our support for changes to improve performance and outcomes for Rodney is not new. We have consistently argued that the region-wide centralised silo management control structures adopted by AC and its CCOs have not been fit for purpose for Rodney².

Rodney's land area comprises 46% of the whole of Auckland council, with 20% of its roads (in km). Rodney is 95% rural, it has 76% of the region's unsealed roads and these make up 41% of all the roads in Rodney.

Rodney's rural ratepayers make up about half the population and pay about half of Rodney's rates.

In our 2020 paper we highlighted that Rodney was unique amongst the other Local Board areas and why spreading half of Rodney's voters as minorities across its urban centres was unfair and did not provide effective representation of communities of interest. (q.v. footnote 1).

² 2013-2020: e.g. NAG's Proposal to separate North Rodney from AC contained arguments about why it did not work for Rodney (e.g see <https://nag.org.nz/AlternativeProposal24.06.16.pdf>) ; and 2023: issues for Mayoral discussions, (<https://nag.org.nz/Active%20NAG%20issues%20for%20Mayor%20Jan2023.pdf>)

Compromise

With such a spread of rural and rural settlement communities and two main population centres, determining the perceptual, functional and political dimensions of effective communities of interest is challenging.

At one extreme electing all 9 members of the local board at large is an obvious starting point.

But that provides no guidance to prospective candidates as to what they stand for other than a “better Rodney”, and we surmise it would likely encourage the provision of political “tickets” of candidate party groups, who would predetermine what they thought was best for the District (and have been controversial in Rodney in recent local boards).

Given the distributed, and therefore less coordinated, groupings of rural voters, such “ticket” parties would have inevitably come from urban areas and lack the understanding of rural interests important to Auckland from its rural economic contribution. Voting “at large” would be expected to produce a form of representation little different from the place based concept of population centre groupings around which subdivision boundaries have been drawn traditionally.

Shifting to a fair representation based on rural/urban differences therefore seems obvious for Rodney – something not relevant in a more consistently dense urban population local board area.

However, a more pure approach based on StatsNZ’s SSGA2023 raises complications of non-contiguous groupings (which would be novel for people to understand) and a compromise which would lump Wellsford in with all the Rural Settlements (1 member) a large Other Rural area (5 members) and a grouping of Small Urban areas (3 members).

The advantage of this arrangement is that it would help remove the political Kumeu v Warkworth, South West v North aspect of Rodney representation and decision making, but our view has consistently been that a shift to changed boundaries AND non-contiguous groupings was too radical a change for voters to readily adjust to.

The current proposal then has elements of the status quo (Dairy Flat boundaries unchanged as they remain within quota; and it recognises the two centres of Kumeu/Huapai and Warkworth) but fairly recognises the mainly rural character of Rodney and the different interests of rural and urban voters.

Variation?

During the consultation period we have heard the opposition to change from current vested interests, and concerns from the Kaukakapa (KKK) community that their representation will be split by the North/South rural boundary (the proposed boundary follows the river through middle of KKK).

While it is a matter for the JGWP whether or not to respond to these concerns, we can see 3 possible ways to meet them which would still be compliant with quota:

1. Shifting the boundary South of KKK to place KKK in North Rural
2. Shifting the boundary north of KKK (to place them in South Rural) and shifting the boundary south of Waitoki catchment (to place them in North Rural).
3. Removing the boundary completely to create a single Rural subdivision of 4 members.

We would not object to any of these changes which maintains quota and satisfies the concerns expressed by those communities.

We do note however, comments made by officials (which we support) that if the concept is based on rural versus urban communities of interest then the question voters should be asking is “am I rural?” not “am I voting in the same subdivision as other people in my neighbourhood?”

We do not share the concerns of some RLB members that this will mean that rural representatives will necessarily come from the South and will not recognise or represent the interests of the people in Wellsford or rural areas. There is a distributed spread of population across the rural area with no particular area dominant.

Our perception is that rural people have needs in common - whether they are from the South Head or Port Albert or Te Arai areas. Subdivision boundaries determine who ratepayers can vote for but they do not restrict where candidates must come from. Our view is that rural voters will universally pick candidates they believe will best represent rural interests across the whole of the district, as well as contributing responsibly to RLB decision-making for the needed development of urban areas.

Conduct of opponents

We have observed scaremongering and misleading comments by a local board member which may misrepresent proposals and potential outcomes. We have also seen postings and views from other local board members which have been supportive or just encouraging engagement, but we have not seen these make misrepresentations.

These Facebook posts from Ivan Wagstaff (below) mislead the public by implying that the proposal will mean people in Whangateau, Wellsford and Sandspit will lose assets or services when there is no reason to presume that will be the case.

The posts suggest that because the representation changes from 3 members for Warkworth and 1 for Wellsford, to 2 for Warkworth and 2 for North Rural, Warkworth and Wellsford voters will lose representatives who make decisions in their interests.

That is wrong because North Rodney still retains 4 members, the same as before, and the combined area of Warkworth and North Rural subdivisions is greater than the current area of Warkworth and Wellsford subdivisions.

Threatening people with the loss of assets or services is scaremongering. Suggesting that it will result from changes to where people vote from is misleading.

AC assets and services in Rodney are not restricted by boundaries and their value and usage can be enjoyed by all. There is clearly no connection between changing the allocation of voters to areas and the decisions elected representatives make on behalf of Rodney ratepayers. Such decisions can not be foretold.

Under the proposal Wellsford gets more rural oriented support and Warkworth continues to get support from North Rural. So there is no reason to imagine scenarios in which decisions will be made that some voters may not like (any more than it is natural for local boards to make decisions some voters do not like).

Also the posts imply a division between north and south Rodney and between rural and urban voting. Whether or not that is seen in decision-making depends entirely on who is elected, not who elected them.

In general we believe people are free to post their views and we are both pleased to see and welcome our local board members actively engaging in supporting their electors.

However, we are concerned that elected representatives may be using the review as an opportunity to promote themselves (sometimes using posts as paid advertising) within and outside their base of voter support - in a way that is not much different in concept from electioneering.

Mr Wagstaff clearly makes these posts in his capacity as a member of the RLB, not as an individual but does not declare any (obvious) conflict of interest. Nor does he disclose

that the RLB, of which he is a member, and whose decisions he has agreed to support as a member of that collective, voted to recommend the proposal to the JGWP and GB.

Recommendation

AC has recognised the conflict of interest present when elected members are required (by law) to propose or resolve the system by which they are elected (and any changes to it).

Local Boards are asked to participate in AC's decisions under the review, and make recommendations which the JGWP gives significant weighting to in making its recommendations to the GB for resolution.

Good governance practice would be for members to recuse themselves from participating in the discussion on the merits or otherwise of such decisions (amongst voters who, presumably, are the ones who are then asked to decide on the systems by which they wish their representatives to be elected). (Standard exceptions are where members can help explain to voters, or provide useful information on, what is proposed, without offering any view as to the merits or otherwise of what is proposed.)

AC chose not to resolve any proposal for consultation under reorganisation review provisions this time. However, we believe the same arguments regarding the position of conflict of interest of elected members and restrictions on participation in public discussion on any proposal should equally apply to any reorganisation or representation proposals resolved for consultation.

We therefore **recommend:**

that the JGWP propose that the GB adopt as policy for future reviews that elected members be required to refrain from publicly expressing any views or opinions on any representation or reorganisation review proposal once it has been resolved for public consultation by the GB.

Northern Action Group Inc.
Landowners and Contractors Association
Rodney Community Voices

APPENDIX: RLB member Facebook postings

Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision
 8 July at 20:03 · 🌐

We all love our community and how we work together. The new North Rural ward proposal removes Wellsford's local representation and takes away representation from Warkworth. Threatening the voices of our combined businesses and communities both urban and rural.

Will our communities be heard with two representatives lost for north Rodney? I am advocating for no change and not losing two north Rodney representatives. Please have you say

<https://akhaveyoursay.aucklandcouncil.g...> See more



👍 Like 💬 Comment 📧 Send

Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision
 27 July at 21:51 · 🌐

Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision
 27 July at 18:24 · 🌐

Only 7 days left!! 🚨 Assets at risk.

1. Do not support the proposed changes.
2. We can't afford to lose our Local Voice in North Rodney. Having representation that has a close connection to our communities is critical. Our communities are already underrepresented and this change would risk further isolation.

Council recently asked the Rodney Local Board if we should outsource the operations of our local campgrounds in Whangateau and Martin's Bay. If we didn't have 3 local votes we could have lost access to them to an Australian Company for good! Council is now proposing to take your votes away. We need your feedback stop this.



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Representation review 2024 📖 Book now
 Every six years, Auckland Council must conduct a review of representa...

👍👎 5 💬 23 comments

Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision
 Sponsored · 🌐

Only 7 days left!! 🚨 please submit feedback. Wharf access at risk. Recently I have been helping [Kawau Volunteer Coastguard](#) work on getting a proper wharf and building to operate from in Sandspit. As locals we know how important all our volunteers are to our safety. It takes votes on the board to approve and support these things and if we lose a vote in Warkworth it will impact decisions like this.

1. Vote against the changes in Rodney
2. Because we need strong representation for our volunteers who support our community. We have a growing population that needs a voice.

<https://yoursay.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/.../SV...>



Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision
 A father of three, he is passionate about ensuring community facilities and services meet ...
 👍 106 💬 9 comments

Ivan Wagstaff - Local Board Rodney Warkworth Subdivision Follow
 Reels · 1 Aug · 🌐

They deleting us!!!

TikTok
 @ivan.wagstaffrodny

Only 7 days left!! 🚨 Rodney Assets at risk. 1. Do not support the proposed changes. 2. We can't afford to lose our Local Voice in North Rodney. Having representation that has a close connection to our communities is critical. Our communities are already underrepresented and this change would risk further isolation. https://yoursay.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/fe/form/SV_bNuLS0VTZdFRBtQ See less

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