Name of Project: Rural Directions 2020 – Wanganui Rural Community Board Strategic Plan 2010-2020

Category: Enhancing Communities

Community Board: Wanganui Rural Community Board

Parent Council: Wanganui District Council

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AIM OF THE WANGANUI RURAL COMMUNITY BOARD

To create a shared ten year strategic vision of the future for the Wanganui Rural Community Board ("Board") aligning with and complementing the Wanganui District Council’s ("Council") ten year plan.

CONTEXT

Situated within the Council boundaries are huge swathes of rural land – significant in terms of size and in terms of economic return that the people living upon the land create for our region. However, the communities and individuals which comprise this rural backbone are neither uniform in character or task but rather together weave an incredibly rich and diverse patchwork of differing occupations, philosophies and circumstance.

The Wanganui rural district is not a single community with a single interest but rather is made up of many communities with many interests. It is the role of the Board to not just find the common strands shared by all, but also to take note of the specific interests and concerns of each group so that the many threads which create this rich tapestry are heard, considered and represented effectively at both Council and Horizons Regional Council ("Horizons").

THE MAKE UP OF THE BOARD

The Board is comprised of eleven individuals\(^1\). Seven members of the Board are elected by rural constituents each representing 500 people. The size of the Board was determined by the Representation Commission and reflects the rural population and size of the Wanganui district. The Wanganui rural district is split into three subdivisions:

1. Kai Iwi subdivision – with two Board members;
2. Kaitoke subdivision – with three Board members; and
3. Whanganui subdivision – with two Board members.

In addition to the seven elected members of the Board, the Council appoints two Councillors who act as conduits promoting and encouraging both a collective vision for the two bodies but also cohesion and consistency between the two with their individual endeavours.

Furthermore, in an attempt to engage and hear the views of young people two Youth Councillors from the Wanganui Youth Committee are appointed to the Board. The Youth Councillors attend Board meetings, and while they have speaking rights they do not have voting rights.

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\(^1\) Refer to Annexure 1: Photo showing the Wanganui Rural Community Board
BACKGROUND

Like many rural community boards the Board has not always been particularly effective in having its voice heard. This is a skill that they have had to acquire and it has not always been an easy or steady climb.

The catalyst came when a new Mayor was elected and threatened the Board’s demise because of its perceived lack of effectiveness – it was viewed as costing money whilst accomplishing little. The Board was effectively being put on notice – this “put up or shut up” moment whilst a spur was not however the catalyst which lit the fuse. The catalyst which drove the Board to collectively stand up was the Council threat to sell off nine rural halls due to shrinking use, increasing maintenance costs and little or no financial return.

Historically, rural community halls have been the central strut of rural communities, absorbing and protectively embracing the collective memory and story of its community. Often built on donated land and/or by volunteer labour some are also memorial halls built to commemorate local people who had lost their lives during conflict. The Board and the people they represented considered these halls to be essential linchpins in preserving part of the social fabric of rural life.

The Board consulted with its communities about this threat to its rural halls and responded to Council with a well reasoned and structured solution to this issue. The rural halls should not be sold but rather transferred to a Rural Halls Trust (“Trust”) which would be created for this purpose. Ultimately, seven of the rural halls within the Wanganui district were transferred over to this Trust and it is now a portfolio of responsibility within the Board.

The Board’s successful resolution with Council on this issue led to its realisation that its actions could have a real impact on rural communities. However, the Board was reactive in its response, it had not yet realised that there was power in being proactive and actively seeking out ways to respond to issues facing rural communities.

In 2008 Council sought the views of the people of the Wanganui district (both urban and rural) about the outcomes they wanted prioritised for the district. The responses received were extremely useful in helping Council formulate some of its priorities within the Annual Plan for the forthcoming year. Council policy advisors then attended a Board meeting and gave a presentation on the proposed draft Annual Plan and explained how to make a submission.

The Board decided to make submissions to both Council and Horizons on each of their respective draft Annual Plans. This decision led to the Board working more closely with the Council policy team (who assisted them with policy support and advice). As a result it was not long before the Board realised that this closer working relationship raised its profile within Council and provided increased opportunities to examine and comment on issues from a rural perspective.

As the Board’s profile increased within Council and became more visible, Board members quickly comprehended that to maintain this momentum and increase their effectiveness their own ten year strategic vision for the Board was needed.
THE PROCESS

A. Timeline:

2008/2009 Community Meetings held.

2009 September – Board agree to develop a ten year strategic plan.

October – Board Communications Strategy approved.

2010 March – Draft ten year strategic plan Rural Directions 2020 (“Rural Directions”) on Board meeting agenda.

May – Format for Rural Directions approved.

December – Workshop held on Rural Directions and portfolios allocated to Board members.

2011 May - The Board adopts first ten year strategic plan Rural Directions. It is the first rural community board in the country to undertake this exercise.

2012 August – Rural Directions reviewed.

B. Community Meetings and Prioritisation:

In early 2009 a workshop for Board members, Council policy advisors, rural businesses and relevant community groups was held to discuss ways in which the Board’s effectiveness could be improved. From these various perspectives common issues of concern were identified and an amorphous overall long term vision for the Board began to emerge.

Following on from this workshop, the Board travelled around the towns of the rural Wanganui district holding community meetings to discuss the issues and ideas which had emerged from the workshop. People were asked to write down what they thought the big issues facing rural communities were in order of priority. They were also asked to note any issue which they thought had been missed.

The responses received from these community meetings were then collated and from this breakdown five issues emerged dominant. These five issues ultimately became the focus points endorsed within Rural Directions the Board’s long term strategic vision document.

From comments and feedback received during the course of these community meetings the Board quickly realised that in order to effectively campaign for and promote the rural Wanganui viewpoint to Council, Horizons and other agencies it was essential that it have a clear understanding of what people living in rural Wanganui were concerned about and what actions they wanted taken.

Collating and understanding how and why certain issues were ranked by
rural Wanganui communities as areas of concern was pivotal in empowering the Board to confidently step forward in its later dealings with Council, Horizons, community groups and state with a comfortable degree of certainty that it was the voice for the collective rural Wanganui community on these issues. This understanding of rural community’s common concerns has aided the Board in developing a more consistent approach in reviewing Council strategies, policies and its submissions made in response thereto, and has ultimately made the Board a more efficient and effective advocate for its constituents.

C. Vision:

Prior to the workshop and subsequent community meetings, the Board had been reactive – responding to issues as they arose. The listing of priorities undertaken by those present at the community meetings enabled the Board to not only identify common concerns but had also helped develop a picture of what a proposed shared long term vision for the rural Wanganui community might look like.

The final vision adopted by the Board was for the Wanganui rural community to be “prosperous, well connected and happy”. This vision strongly complemented the Council’s Family Friendly Strategy 2012-2022 vision - that of a community flourishing both economically and socially.

Rural Directions is a living document which is reviewed, tweaked and updated each year. This annual process enables the Board to continually review and improve its effectiveness and encourages the Board to continually develop and evolve its identity, role and function through its delegated authority. The vision, the mission and the focus areas contained within Rural Directions permeates through everything that the Board does.

D. Mission:

While the Rural Directions 2020 strategy document does not contain any specific or defined targets or KPIs it clearly and succinctly articulates what the Board views as its primary task which is “promoting sustainable economic growth and community wellbeing.”

The mission is “blue sky” in nature and is a thematic road map which sets out the Board’s goals and objectives for the next ten years within the five focus areas (discussed below). These focus areas are broad and provide an aspirational end view for the Board to strive for and work towards through undertaking specific projects designed to help accomplish these goals.

E. Focus Areas:

The five main areas of concern for the people of rural Wanganui identified through the workshop and community meetings are issues which require long term sustained focus and work – (1) sustainable rural economic growth, (2) rural roads, (3) community services, (4) community engagement and (5) governance. As a consequence of these community meetings the Board realised that how they had traditionally planned their yearly objectives did not provide sufficient time to implement and effect lasting change with respect to these issues.

While an action plan for each year is essential this needs to be considered in the context of where the Board sees itself being in ten years time and where it is now in terms of accomplishing its
ten year goals and objectives. The Council’s Annual Plan is the Board’s road map for that year in their journey toward the final goal.

These five areas are now the central focus points of the Rural Directions mission. These drive the Board’s projects each year and form the basis of its submissions to both Council and Horizons with respect to their draft Annual Plans and Ten Year Plans.

1. Sustainable Rural Economic Growth

As previously stated, the Wanganui rural district is not a single community with a single interest but rather is made up of many communities with many interests. It is therefore crucial that the Board is able to adapt to this evolving and changing community structure – its expectations, internet connectivity, environmental constraints and economic issues e.g. emerging trends and diminishing markets.

In Rural Directions the Board’s focus on “sustainable rural economic growth” aligns with and complements the Council’s Economic Development Strategy. Council’s strategy highlights how important the role of the rural sector is in growing the Wanganui region’s economy.

A key priority for the Board under this focus area is rural broadband. The Board has proactively championed the construction of broadband infrastructure within the rural Wanganui district and this importance is underscored by it having its own portfolio upon the Board.

Other important projects under this focus include developing strong relationships with key stakeholders such as research institutes and local experts. These relationships have resulted in studies being undertaken with respect to the forestry effect on rural roads, and changing land use.

2. Roading

Another key area of concern for the Board is ensuring that the current level of funding from New Zealand Transport Agency (“NZTA”) is maintained for our rural roads.

Our primary industries are key drivers in both the local and wider regional economies and while we may have low volumes of traffic on our rural road system due to the small and geographically dispersed rural population this does not mean that our roads are uneconomic – our rural road system transports to market commodities with high value. It is for this reason that the Board is currently challenging NZTA definition of what is an “economic road.” BERL in a 2011 report stated that “in 2010 the agriculture and forestry sectors were responsible for 15% of employment, 23% of GDP and 19% of business units in the Wanganui District.”

As our produce is primarily transported around the country by truck it is therefore crucial that we have a safe and efficient rural road system. To this end, the Board has assisted Council in developing, monitoring and reviewing Council’s Rural Road Strategy.

The Wanganui district also has a large amount of land planted for forestry - a significant proportion of which is due for felling in the coming years. The Board through Rural Directions has various projects underway in this focus

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2 Wanganui District Council 10 Year Plan 2012-2022, pg 36. (Statistics obtained from the “Analysis of primary sectors and their road use”, BERL, October 2011).
area investigating the cost forestry harvesting and the impact the tremendously heavy logging trucks will have on our rural roads.

3. Community Wellbeing

Rural areas are by their very nature geographically isolated and removed from proximity to social and community services such as healthcare, education and libraries which urban populations take for granted. The Board is conscious of the importance such services have on people’s emotional and physical wellbeing and the impact restricted access to these can have on individuals and communities as a whole.

This recognition of how important such services are to rural communities is a key reason why the Board championed the Rural Broadband Initiative and why it garnered such tremendous local buy in. Maintaining and being able to access such social services through broadband is crucial to the continued viability of rural life for families.

Rural Halls – the original litmus that lit the fuse of the Board is another community amenity which has a central role in the life of rural communities. The journey the Board has undertaken from the initial threat of closing the rural halls to the creation of the Trust showcases the incredible journey the Board has been on – from being a reactive Board to a proactive Board with both one year and ten year goals and objectives.

4. Communication

In September 2009 the Board adopted its Communications Strategy which has subsequently been reviewed and updated.

As both champion and advocate for the diverse range of rural people, rural communities and rural life within the Wanganui district it is important that the Board actively engages with all its constituents. It understands that its very effectiveness as a Board is dependent upon engaging with these communities and taking them along on the ten year Rural Directions journey.

It is therefore essential that its priorities, projects and activities are clearly articulated to the rural community. The Board utilises various tools to achieve this:

(i) The Wanganui Chronicle has a weekly Community Link page. Each month in a column titled “On the Land” a nominated Board member writes about a current issue of importance with respect to their portfolio.

(ii) The Board has a six monthly newsletter “Hotwire” which is distributed to all rural households within the Wanganui district.

(iii) Regular community meetings are held around the three rural subdivisions. At least two Board members will be present at each community meeting to let people know what the Board is doing, to answer queries and to listen to people’s concerns.

5. Governance - Portfolios:

While participating in the process of creating the Rural Directions strategy document the Board made the decision to allocate a portfolio of responsibility to each individual Board member. This has meant that no focus area is forgotten or lags behind other more topical issues of concern as each portfolio always has outstanding goals and objectives to strive towards.
The Board has nine portfolios - roading, economic development, rural broadband, rural halls trust, communication, water, community wellbeing and rural security. The Governance portfolio is a shared portfolio and remains within the remit of all members of the Board. Apportioning responsibility to specific Board members has helped to create within the Board an environment of informed discussion, and increasing levels of effective and efficient advocacy. All of these measures when taken together have culminated in Rural Directions having teeth and punching well above its weight.

THE COST

Rural Directions has been developed and implemented with no allocated budget and minimal cost. Board members were recompensed for their time attending the workshops and Board meetings; small charges were payable for hiring premises to hold the rural community meetings around the district and then there were internal staff costs absorbed by Council with respect to the Council policy advisors who provided administrative support to the Board during the envisioning, formulating, consulting and implementation phases of this strategic document.

OUTCOMES

Rural Directions is the road map which provides the Board with direction as to where it wants to be in ten years time and allows work on significant projects over substantial periods of time to be planned, budgeted and undertaken.

Rural Directions has been instrumental in making the Board a more effective advocate for the rural communities of Wanganui and hence a more credible presence at the Council table. One consequence of undergoing this transformative process is that the Board now has representation on all Council Committees and recently Council resolved to give the Board representatives voting rights at these Council committee meetings. Up until then, while the Board could attend Council committee meetings they only had speaking rights. The positive relationship that the Board has with Council ensures that it continues to develop as a Board and is constantly encouraged and empowered by the Council.

These opportunities have only come about because of that initial Annual Plan presentation given by Council Policy Advisors in 2008 which led to the Board’s subsequent “consciousness raising” to the many issues before Council which impacted on rural communities and the opportunities afforded to the Board if it so chose to take them up.

In August 2011 the Board hosted a conference for other community boards from throughout the lower North Island to share developments on and about community boards and how they could best serve their communities. This was the first such conference to be hosted in over a decade and the Board was chosen to host this event partly in recognition of the productive and successful work they had achieved over the few years.

In November 2011 the Board was held up by the Local Government Commission as a leader in community board strategic planning and used as an example of best practice. Rural Directions is used as a template to assist and show other community boards how to undertake the process of
proactively considering their long term future goals.

Rural Directions continues to be considered whenever new issues come before the Board. It is used to inform other agencies within the Wanganui region of the Board’s direction, what it wants to achieve, and what it needs to have happen in order for this shared vision to be realised.
Annexure 1 – Photo showing the Wanganui Rural Community Board

Standing (left to right): Cr Nikki Higgie, Mark Johnson, Mayor Annette Main, Darrell Monk, Bill Ashworth
Seated: Deputy Chair David Matthews, Chair Alan Taylor, Andy Collins
(Absent: Cr Hamish McDouall, Mark Lourie, Yth Crs Sally Dickison and Daniel Marks)