

If the governance is not broken, why fix it?

In his own words, Warren Slater is a former and future mayoral candidate with a sincere interest in local body politics

ONE, two, three or four? The McKinlay Report of Unitary Authorities in Northland was presented over six meetings in the district. Monday evening, Whangarei, the vehicle to deliver this public discussion rumbled into town. Comments indicated minimal notice was given regarding these important meetings. Questions were fired at Peter McKinlay, principal author. Unaided, Peter replied, admitting that he had not personally experienced dealings with the four councils in Northland on issues of attending public council meetings, submission processes, resource consent application or applying for information through the Official Information Act. He acted on information provided to him and not first-hand experience. The above issues determine how the public perceive their council. A show of hands on the "Trust of Councils" resulted in one hand meekly raised to support the trust of Whangarei District Council while many trusted the Northland Regional Council.

The Dargaville meeting, also poorly advertised, had a tense atmosphere on Wednesday evening.

Local publisher Allan Mortensen suggested — on advice received from John Carter, Associate Minister of Local Government — that a simple A4 letter signed by the three mayors of Northland and chairman of Northland Regional Council asking the Government to look at restructuring for the needs of Northland was all that was necessary.

Peter was alarmed. These comments were possibly undermining the need of his report. Mayor Neil Tiller and NRC chairman Mark Farnsworth, in attendance, watched the demise of civility in the meeting when the Whangarei chief executive officer, Mark Simpson, suggested to a local resident that he was associated to one of the council authorities and also was a partner of one of their staff. Didn't he himself have association? Many claimed his questioning was irrelevant, to a ratepayer at a public meeting, with questions and comments being invited by the presenter. Back under some control, the meeting proceeded with an interesting statement; "only 30 people had been interviewed in Northland to assess its needs". Is

this a fair representation of fractions of the community stakeholders on their future of local governance?

My wife, Pat, and I ventured to Kaikohe, the last stop on the McKinley journey. On arrival, Peter questioned if we had memory problems or was there nothing better to do in Northland than to follow his presentation. Was it the same old, same old? No, now when questioned, the number of people interviewed during the compilation of this report had jumped to about 120. Strange, how could someone so astute make such mistakes like claiming "I thought the number of 30 was a bit light after the Dargaville meeting and had a recount". Pleased we had gone to 50 per cent of the meetings to perhaps check his memory and not ours. Another interesting quote was among the socio-economic ratings of Northland, which ranked one-16. All the statistics presented were at the low end of the scale 13-16. Is this a true picture of how Northland really is? Obviously, all the questions asked weren't shown on the presentation, such as how polluted does the Whangarei Harbour get? Maybe this would have scored in the one to five.

Actually, we do have successes so was this a fair report? When questioned, Peter believed Northland's governance "wasn't broken". If not broken then why waste money fixing it, or is there a hidden agenda? Please tell me, or for me, it's status quo with modifications, if necessary, to move Northland forward.

Why were the two "drivers" of this bus, the Far North and Whangarei District Council mayors, absent and unable to hear first-hand concerns from the people that they had been elected to represent? Were their ideas cast in stone and are others' opinions of no concern? How absent from their tour of duty can they be, before becoming redundant?

To date there is no proof of any cost savings. A change may have an impact on ratepayers with them needing deeper pockets for rates. Maybe public consultation should be the start of any process for community needs, before the wheelbarrows of a few in power leave the shed.

Don't forget to have your say on Northland's future as submissions close on May 31.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Northern Advocate 9th April 2010