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UNITARY AUTHORITIES PUSH DRIVEN BY SELF – NOT PUBLIC – INTEREST, NRC CLAIMS

Self – not public – interest is behind a looming push by Northland’s District Councils for a restructure of the region’s local government, Regional Councillors claim.

Northland Regional Council Chairman Mark Farnsworth says he understands all three District Councils will meet separately this week to discuss a consultants’ report the District Councils commissioned on the topic.

“I believe that shortly afterward at least two – and maybe all three – District Councils will release a final version of the report and call for public consultation on the formation of separate unitary authorities in their respective Districts.”

Mr Farnsworth says the Regional Council’s consistent position has been that it would be comfortable with a reform of local government in Northland – even if it led to the demise of the Regional Council in its current form - provided it was truly in the best interests of the region and was what the Northland public wanted.

“However, my fellow Regional Councillors and I believe what we have here is an attempt to drum up public support for change based on a flawed report commissioned by the District Councils – one which we feel lacks independence and crucial detail. Even worse, we believe the true driver of this issue is the personal aspirations of Mayors, rather than any real push for change by ordinary Northlanders.”

Mr Farnsworth understands that the ultimate recommendation of an initial draft of the report last year was in fact for just one unitary authority across Northland.

“I for one will certainly be very interested to see what the recommendations of the final report are when it’s released by the District Councils.”

He believes the District Councils will face an uphill battle convincing Northlanders and Central Government they have the required will, technical and financial capacity to properly assume the Regional Council’s responsibilities.

Leaving aside questions over the reportedly \$80,000 report’s independence (which the Regional Council did not contribute to), Mr Farnsworth says it also lacks crucial detail such as the likely cost of a local government reorganisation in Northland, which he believed would run to millions for no real gain in efficiency for ordinary Northlanders.

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He believes Northland's District Councils, which are typically struggling with mounting debt and weighty infrastructural demands, would like to take advantage of the opportunities the Regional Council's strong asset base and financial position might offer them. Some were also clearly unhappy with the level of attention the Regional Council paid to their Councils' environmental performance.

Mr Farnsworth says Central Government had clearly stated in recent months that it had no intention of entertaining any push by any of New Zealand's local authorities to assume Regional Council roles until well after the Auckland Super City reorganisation – and any lessons to be learned from it - is complete.

And he says the authors of a recent Ministry for the Environment review of the FNDC's resource consent processing had been blunt on the issue of any Far North District Council push for a unitary authority.

The report's authors noted that the FNDC had "much work to do to get its own house in order" including substantial improvements to its District Plan and its wastewater treatment and disposal infrastructure.

Mr Farnsworth says the MfE report says such matters should be the FNDC's priority and until they had been resolved "the question of whether the (Far North) Council should exercise unitary functions should not be explored actively."

The report said it simply "would not be appropriate" for the FNDC to make decisions on standards for wastewater discharges to the coastal environment.

"I believe that similar comments could probably be applied to a greater or lesser degree to all three District Councils," Mr Farnsworth says.

Mr Farnsworth says he acknowledges there are some areas where the NRC could do better, but says that is true of virtually anything anyone does. "As a Council we're always looking for ways we can improve our performance."

"My fellow Councillors and I urge our District Council counterparts to put aside their egos and instead work with us collectively to ensure that the interests of Northland – and not its politicians – are paramount."

"There is still much work to be done in Northland environmentally, economically and socially - and politicking and grandstanding does little to achieve this."

ENDS

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