

Russell Protection Society Meeting

October 27, 2012

1. Introduction

First of all I would like to apologise for having our Labour Day meeting a week after the event. The Secretary and I both got our dates wrong this year and assumed that the holiday would fall more towards the end of the month.

As I mentioned at our last AGM, the Russell Protection Society has now been in existence for well over 20 years and your Society has become increasingly relevant as other cities and towns across New Zealand have progressively lost their character and historic fabric. Visitors to our Township constantly remind us of how lucky we are to live and recreate in such an amazing environment. We have always promoted the wise and sustainable development of historic Russell and there are a number of examples of where this has occurred, but sadly it appears that for some developers the dollar sign seems to predominate over appropriate planning and design. This is somewhat ironic in my view because good planning and design underpin our future as one of New Zealand's premier tourist destinations and is what separates us from some of the more mundane places such as Paihia or Orewa.

Unfortunately there seem to be a few individuals in our community who have a need to personalise issues when they don't agree with the position taken by our Society – to use the common expression they need to play the ball and not the player. When people resort to bullying tactics by claiming that we are a small minority of troublemakers or they maintain that we have no mandate to speak, it indicates to me that they are either insecure or unsure of their own stance and think that if they shout loudly enough they will somehow prevail. This is not something new and in the past Andrew Riddell and Martin Leiding have both been subjected to this kind of abuse. We can effectively deal with these calculated attacks by supporting one another and by becoming actively involved where appropriate, rather than resorting to the sort of tactics that we abhor. I will return to this theme later.

2. Sewerage, of course..

Again, no RPS meeting would be complete without a reference to the sewerage situation in Russell. Your Society was recently contacted by Mr Ruben Wylie, Resource Consents Specialist in the Infrastructure and Asset Management Division of the Far North District Council. Council is in the process of renewing its Resource Consents for the Russell Waste Treatment Plant and is committed to consulting with all the major groups in our community. We have been able to play a positive role by ensuring that they have engaged our original consultants, Simon Carryer and Riley Group, to review the existing scheme and to report on the maintenance and management protocols that are required. We have also highlighted issues with stormwater and groundwater infiltration into the reticulation network, a lack of rotation and spelling of the disposal bores and gaps in the monitoring programme. Ruben is to address these issues in a draft consent application that he will then circulate to us prior to lodging it. Of particular note is a proposed condition of consent that will ensure that only properties within the current ly defined service area can be connected to the scheme in the future. On that basis it is anticipated that our Society can give support to the Council's application.

3. Future of Russell

Your Society was also contacted by Jane Johnson, project manager for the Far North District Council's Sustainable Growth Strategy. Council is setting up a series of workshops with local

community representatives to look at the future of their respective areas. This will help to inform future planning and budgeting within Council as well as influencing the activities of other government departments. In response I sent the following email:

Tena koe Aisha

Thank you for your email message. I would like to suggest that your team take the opportunity to familiarise itself with all the previous investigations and planning exercises that have been carried out in relation to the Historic Russell Township and its surrounding peninsula. This should greatly assist the team in its endeavors and will help to avoid costly duplication.

The matters I refer to are as follows:

- The Russell Planning Study (1970's) carried out by the Ministry of Works and Development/Department of Lands and Survey - Comprehensive planning study of NZ's iconic Russell Township which resulted in a number of published documents, including the "Russell Handbook", "Architecture of Russell", "Landscape of Russell" and "History of Russell"*
- Review of the Russell Planning Study (1980's) carried out by the Department of Lands and Survey/Department of Conservation with consultants MWD/Denis Nugent/Jeremy Salmond. Published report was used to inform current zoning of Russell and historic precincts.*
- Russell 2000 survey (1990's) carried out by a group formed by the Russell Protection Society (RPS), the Russell Business Association (RBS) and the Russell Ratepayers Group (RRG). A survey questionnaire was sent to all households asking what was important about Russell and what it should be like in the future. A report on the findings was published and sent to Council.*
- Review of Russell 2000 report (2000's) carried out by the Russell Protection Society. A summary of the major findings of the Russell 2000 report was produced and published in the "Russell Lights" and placed on the RPS web site for comment. The comments received were then incorporated into the final document (see attachment)*
- Survey of Visitors to Russell (2000's) carried out by the Russell Business Association. This survey was published by the RBA and largely supports findings in all the above studies (see attachment).*

What is remarkable about all of the investigations listed above is that the results from each are very similar and tend to reinforce a consistent and coherent message about a mutually desired future for Russell Township and Peninsula.

I am happy to further discuss with you and your team any of the matters referred to above.

Kind regards

Bob Drey

Chairperson

Russell Protection Society

It may be useful to again record what our review of the Russell 2000 survey provides, which is featured on the RPS web site. It reads:

The Future of Russell

The following was originally contained in a newsletter sent to all the membership and published in the Russell Lights seeking comment. These comments have subsequently been incorporated into this article.

There are a number of different views about what the future should be for Russell; however there also appear to be some commonly shared aspirations. We all wish to see the Township grow and prosper; but in what direction? If Russell truly is an icon, then exactly what is it that makes it unique for NZ? Is it something more than just a quaint village with “attitude”?

Some of the terms used in the Russell 2000 visioning process, which the RPS supported, were:

- “Village atmosphere”*
- “Worked in lived in environment”*
- “Pedestrian scale”*
- “Natural surrounds”*
- “Friendly character”*
- “Maritime influence”*
- “Sense of place”*
- “Laidback living”*
- “Our heritage”*

What does this all mean (and what doesn't it mean) for the future of Russell?

For a start, if Russell is to continue as a village, then it must grow within clear boundaries, while protecting its important setting of undeveloped headlands and backdrop. The original layout or “town plan” for the area is still largely intact and this should be preserved. The small scale of individual buildings within the village also needs to be fostered and therefore growth should be directed at the smaller end of the scale while avoiding large new developments such as condos, hotels, motels, resorts, chain restaurants, high rise, comprehensive designs employing identical “cookie cutter” buildings and self contained “theme” complexes. The remaining historic buildings can only be appreciated and interpreted if these are contained within an appropriate landscape setting.

Growth in employment should continue to be provided for through mixed uses, home-based work, cottage industries, arts & crafts, bed & breakfast establishments and small scale tourist industries. Tourism should be based around the use of this low key accommodation, occurring mainly as a pedestrian activity that relies primarily upon the special character and historic attractions of the area.

The landscape of the area should be protected and enhanced by encouraging more tree planting, preserving open spaces and maintaining key sight corridors. The narrow, tree lined streets and grassed berms with water tables should be retained and the soft edges maintained regularly. Where concrete is used for sidewalks it should be tinted to reduce its visual impact.

One particular building design or style should not be enforced, but instead people should be encouraged to use timber construction and cladding, using pitched roofs and traditional soft elements where practicable while avoiding discordant mono-cladding and terracotta colours. Picket fences and minimal setbacks are appropriate; however retention of open space and gardens is also important.

Alterations to buildings in the historic precincts do need to be more tightly controlled in order to

protect the historic character of the Township. Linkages with the wharf and beach can be improved and the pohutukawa trees safeguarded. Public works should be appropriate to a village environment and things like sign posting and street furniture should be unobtrusive. Greater use can be made of carefully designed and sited historic walk plaques and other information.

The balance of Russell Peninsula should continue to serve as a rural hinterland to the Township, while avoiding a ribbon of urban/commercial development extending all the way to Okiato. Most importantly, because Russell is unique for both its past history and its present character, we must each accept responsibility for protecting this heritage for our grandchildren in the face of perverse economic incentives that often seem intent on destroying it.

What are your views on the matter? The Russell Protection Society would like to hear your ideas about how you and your grandchildren would like see Russell in the future.

There are also other factors which may be even more important in the end. These factors relate to the limits of infrastructure, notably sewerage and water. Our Russell Sewerage Scheme has a limited capacity and, as mentioned previously, is only able to service those properties within the existing sewerage scheme district. The RPS has participated in a catchment management planning process for Russell and also the review of existing water rights. It is evident that the abstraction of groundwater is already oversubscribed and hence existing water takes have been scaled back and there is no capacity to increase that take in the future. I also understand that the existing organisations in Russell are on record before Council as opposing a community water scheme for Russell, especially since existing property owners have already invested heavily in their own individual water systems. For these reasons large-scale developments such as condominiums and destination hotels will be inappropriate for Russell.

Earlier I mentioned the problems that occur with a lack of forward planning in Russell. A good example of this is the current debate over the future of the petrol station in Russell. The RPS has been involved in the special zoning of land at the corner of Aucks and Russell Coast Rd for almost a decade. The intention there is to provide for appropriate activities that cannot be accommodated within the Township boundaries and which will not compromise the environmental and traffic safety of this sensitive site. For that reason petrol stations are a non-complying activity. There is a well accepted body of retail theory that looks at the role of “attractors” and “critical mass” to plan business districts. Basically there are certain critical enterprises that serve to attract people to an area and other surrounding businesses then benefit from this. Things like petrol stations, banks and grocery stores are considered important attractors. In accordance with well documented evidence elsewhere, the existing commercial area in the Township will suffer if the petrol station is moved all the way to Orongo Bay. As the site at Orongo Bay develops around this node with food and other retail businesses, so then will the commercial area of Russell Township decline, as has been documented in New Zealand, North America and Europe as regional centres have increasingly destroyed original town centres. Also noted is that the existing petrol station is purported to be the oldest operating station in New Zealand and thus serves as a tourist attraction in its own right, with many visitors taking photographs of it. You will have seen a letter that the RPS wrote some time ago to the previous petrol wholesaler regarding this issue. It does appear as if personalities and loyalties can sometimes serve to obscure proper retail planning in Russell.

4. Russell Petrol Station Debate

As mentioned earlier, the RPS been involved for a long time with the special zoning at Orongo

Bay and has invested a considerable sum of money in hiring a lawyer and planner to appear before the Environment Court in support of carefully defining the activities and environmental standards that should apply to this site, which is low lying, prone to flooding, borders on a marine farming zone and is located on a dangerous stretch of road. For these reasons, the bar is set very high in terms of avoiding potential environmental impacts. Therefore the oyster farmer and Maori representatives are on record as expressing concerns about the impact that a petrol station would have upon the receiving marine environment. In my view, the future of the marine farming industry in this area is at stake. The farmers must meet high standards in order to market their product overseas and are required by the USDA to fund a “sanitary survey” that looks at potential hazards within the entire catchment. If an unacceptable level of new risk is found, then approval to export to key markets could be declined. While there are existing protocols to cope with bacterial and viral contamination, especially after heavy rainfalls flush contaminants from the surrounding land, the types of toxic material found at petrol stations create a whole new risk which existing protocols cannot address. The Orongo Bay marine farms are the oldest in NZ and add measurably to the economy of Russell, especially during the quiet winter months, and it is mystifying why these business interests are not being accorded due respect. In a similar fashion, tangata whenua have strong concerns about their customary kia moana resources and also about the practical and spiritual qualities of “wai” and the need to prevent its degradation through pollution. The Environment Court has already formally recognised the special relationship that local Iwi/Hapu have with their moana through the Russell Sewerage Scheme Appeal decision.

It is pleasing to note that in the face of some groups arguing that the resource application should not be publicly notified, that the GAS Company has agreed to allow the community of Russell to have its say through the democratic processes provided for in the Resource Management Act (RMA). The RPS has a considerable amount of information gained through its long involvement with this issue and will be able to positively assist and inform the process in a situation where many of the participants lack this “corporate knowledge”. In terms of the RMA this is not a “popularity contest”, but is designed to carefully assess the technical information and planning aspects associated with the proposal within the context of the District Plan. Your Committee has been kept fully involved as this long running issue has gradually unfolded and this meeting now provides an opportunity for the wider membership to discuss the matter.

5. Russell Wharf

Further to my comments at the AGM this year I can now report that the repairs and modifications to the Russell Wharf have largely been completed. However, the funding of this project is still unresolved and this raises questions about the liability for meeting these costs. It is understood that fund raising has met less than half of the \$100k liability assumed by the Wharf Trust and the question then arises as to how this shortfall will be met. The RPS has been clear that the historic and visual integrity of the wharf should not be sacrificed in an effort to attract commercial donors. Unfortunately the proponents of this project steadfastly refused to hold a public meeting to discuss details of the project and hence it is not unreasonable to assume that any shortfall is the responsibility of the Trust and not the Russell community as a whole.

6. Appeal of Subdivision at Long Beach

The Far North District Council decided to decline a non-complying subdivision at Long Beach and the applicant has appealed that decision. The RPS has entered the appeal as a s274 party in support of the Council because there are important issues surrounding the integrity of the Coastal Living Zone and its role of circumscribing Russell Township and protecting its backdrop. It does appear that requirements of zones in the District Plan, which the RPS has worked hard to support, are sometimes not taken seriously by developers and subdividers. Once a precedent is set for a higher density of

development than is permitted, it then offers the opportunity for land owners of similarly zoned land to exploit this. It is interesting to note that sometimes individuals are critical of the rules in the District Plan and claim (falsely) that “private property rights” are paramount, however when their neighbour proposes some action that may affect their own property values or peace of mind, they are often the first to demand that the Council take swift and effective action to stop it. It is noted that the hallmark of a just and ordered society is that we all play by the same agreed rules.

7. Future of Russell Forum

Recent actions taken by the Russell Forum have served to call into question how that body operates and what its mandate is supposed to be. The convenor of the Forum, Terry Greening, recently sent out an email message in which he talked about the “high level of support” on the Forum for relocating the petrol station and then went on to refer to a “silent majority” in support being countered by a “noisy few”, obviously referring to our Society. Firstly, I find it appalling that our Community Board Representative would take such a biased stance, when we were unable to attend the meeting in question, and then to use his position as convenor to criticise a Forum member. More particularly, his actions fundamentally undermine the integrity and agreed purpose of the Forum. The following points were previously put forward by your Chairperson for discussion at the Forum and agreed to by the members:

- *It is noted that the Russell Executive (RX) is referred to as a "forum" several times in the minutes. In our view that is a correct description of the purpose and function of the body and hence we believe that the name "Russell Forum" is most appropriate. The name "Representing Russell" is both awkward and implies that somehow the body is representing the whole of Russell and able to make decisions on its behalf.*
- *The RX was originally set up as a vehicle to promote unity among the various groups in Russell, where possible. It was never intended as a decision making body or a "mini-council", but rather as a body for discussion and consensus building. It is intended that the relevant committees of each group would fully debate each issue and then bring their views to the RX. It is then left to each constituent member organisation to make submissions, particularly where there is no consensus within the Forum.*
- *In our view the Russell Forum should be inclusive rather than exclusive if it is to promote unity. It is considered that groups should not be excluded if they wish to join, in fact groups such as the Tapeka Ratepayers and others should be encouraged to participate, particularly where they may have a direct interest in the matter being discussed. In order to be consistent, the Russell Forum should have a convener rather than a chairperson and their role should simply be to organise the meetings, where required. A neutral venue for the meetings is also required.*

It may now be timely for us to discuss our involvement in the Russell Forum and how or if the original purpose and mandate of that body, which is still relevant in my view, can be renewed.