

Russell Protection Society
AGM 2 January 2009, Russell

1. Introduction

It has been a busy year for the Russell Protection Society and it has no doubt also been a fulfilling year for our membership. Mention is due for the owners of Lindsay Construction, who won the coveted builders award from the NZ Institute of Architects for the stunning beach house they constructed in the Bay of Islands.

Sadly a stalwart member of our Society, George Lawrence has succumbed to age, having lived a full life where both he and Molly were active in the Russell community in their support for local conservation initiatives. At our meeting of 17 November it was resolved to make a donation on his behalf to Russell Landcare.

2. Russell Landfill

Your Society was able to serve as the coordinating body to fight an ill-considered proposal by the Far North District Council to use our small tip to dispose of most of the Far North's waste. This half baked scheme was apparently dreamed up by a Kaitaia councillor, Denis Bowman and a local contractor without reference to the community of Russell, a proper business plan or even discussion within Council. Sadly this seems very typical of the "cowboy Council" and the way that they now do business.

In a letter to the Northland Age, Martin succinctly described the issues at stake. He wrote:

I write regarding your editorial, form 9 December 08 "The big picture" and Wayne Brown's and Joe Carr's columns from 11 December on the dumping of district rubbish at Russell.

Background information sometimes helps to understand an issue. As Joe Carr explains there are serious issues to consider when setting up and running landfills, making small tips uneconomical. Hence the FNDC's long term plan was to truck waste to the professionally managed landfill at Redvale north of Auckland where, among other things, methane gas from the rubbish is extracted and converted into electricity, which does not occur at small landfills.

In previous years the Whangarei District Council (WDC) has planned and now obtained consent for a large land fill at Puwera south of Whangarei which will be operational in 2010 and can service the whole of Northland for many decades.

On 6 June 07 the FNDC issued a press release that the Far North and Whangarei district councils would work in a partnership on this project. This would meet the Far North's solid waste disposal needs for a long time to come and sharing costs would be more economically viable than each council going it alone by establishing their own

landfill sites. That did sound like a great long term plan all things considered. There is also the opportunity to utilize rail moving the waste down south and streamline transport.

Early October this year the chairperson of the Russell Ratepayers Association read in the Council minutes that the FNDC had encountered problems negotiating with WDC and that, quote, "our (FNDC) time for retaliating will come when they seek our (FNDC's) custom". The minutes further revealed that a private landfill at Whangae south of Opuia, close to the existing, currently closed FNDC owned landfill, was now being negotiated but this was expected to take 3 years. In the meantime "it would make sense to use every cubic meter of landfill we have" available. In short it was proposed to fill up the Russell landfill until the private landowner, who is also the contractor for the Russell landfill and recycling station, had consent for his own landfill.

The Russell Ratepayers Association then wrote a letter to the FNDC requesting a full explanation and raising concerns about Council's intention. Two Council officials came to Russell the following week and advised that the dumping of 1000 tonnes of waste per month (40 tonnes per day) from all areas south of Mangonui is going ahead starting 1 December, giving us two weeks notice. The FNDC issued a press release the following day on 21 November saying that "by utilizing the Whangae and Russell landfill for all waste from the southern area and maximizing the use of Ahipara landfill for refuse from the northern area, we anticipate a saving of around \$300,000 a year in transportation costs".

While this statement refers to the combined anticipated saving of all three landfills the same number was used in Council's 02 December press release "Russell Landfill Issue - Fact Sheet" referring only to Whangae and Russell landfills. The amount of \$300,000 savings was thrown at the public and media without any supporting costings. There is no business plan that compares actual saving against future expenses such as future ferry charges and fuel costs for Russell rubbish, the set up costs for a transfer station, the administration expenses, additional monitoring, rodent control, potential social costs. Most importantly the Russell Tip is currently making almost twice as much money as other FNDC transfer stations on average.

For 3 weeks now the Council has been unable to answer to anyone what the components are that make up this \$300k. First it was the cost of fuel, then suddenly, it was the increased fees at Redvale, as stated during the meeting on Friday 5th with the Russell Executive. In any event, for the distance the rubbish trucks will need to travel to Russell from the Kawakawa SH1 turn off and the \$90 ferry costs per truck and trailer for a return trip, they could drive to Whangarei and back for less (assuming that sending these huge garbage trucks along Puketona Road and through Paihia and environs is not part of the plan).

We were advised that all tips and transfer stations are subsidized by Council, however revenue vs expenditure is 35% at Russell compared to the district average of 20%. Council quoted the annual takings from the Russell tip being \$68k. The difference between the district average and the Russell tip revenue is \$30,000 per annum or \$300,000 over 10 years. This is where the real savings are. This is the real big picture. It would make a lot of sense to keep the Russell tip for the use of the Russell peninsula

and keep it running for its expected life of 17 years, this could save the ratepayers \$500,000 at today's prices without even taking the cost into consideration for transporting the Russell peninsula's rubbish to another landfill.

Whangae as a district tip is as unsuitable as Russell is. It's close to waterways and not in a central location, and trucks would need to travel through Paihia or Kawakawa to deliver the waste from the Far North's centres. Nothing appears to have been properly considered and thought through in this saga, Council even overlooked the management plan of the consent for the Russell Landfill, which clearly defines the catchment area for the Russell Landfill being the Russell peninsula. Hence all effects on the receiving environment and community are calculated on the volume of waste produced by that population. Increasing the current small volume and the type of waste is simply not part of the consent.

Other effects on our community or adjoining neighbours have been totally ignored. The large trucks slowed down the commuter traffic at the ferry ramps and I question if it would have been safe to turn in and out of the small driveway of our tip. Increase in rat population, odours, effects of additional leachate and many other issues were hardly taken into consideration - at a location where people go on holiday, the mind boggles.

Ironically the Russell community, by blocking the Russell Tip on Monday 1st, prevented the Council from illegal dumping and prosecution.

Wayne Brown says in his column that having only one meeting each month means that staff and officials hear and know the same stuff. Perhaps it needs two meetings to avoid carrying out such an ill considered and stupid plan.

To carry on from Martin's narrative, on 1 December about 65 people gathered at the Russell Tip to block two huge trucks that had been spotted crossing on the Okiato Ferry. We forced the trucks to turn around and go back across the ferry without dumping their noxious cargo. At the meeting later that day it was resolved to mount a legal challenge, to conduct a media campaign and to coordinate for more direct action, if necessary. The next day about 150 people turned up at the tip in case any more trucks arrived.

Your Society wrote a letter to the Chairperson of the Northland Regional Council outlining the reasons why the actions of the FNDC were illegal. The NRC then obtained a legal opinion which supported our argument. A public meeting in the town hall attended by 300 people made it clear that the Russell community was simply not going to accept being dumped on. This message was conveyed to the FNDC in a meeting with them the following day.

The current situation is that the FNDC is supposed to get back in touch with us to explain whether they are going to make the necessary applications to proceed with their plan or not. In the meantime we have written another letter to the NRC explaining that the FNDC must legally make a notified application if it wish to proceed. We have heard nothing from the FNDC since 5 December on this matter. Watch this space.

3. FNDC Rating Review

The FNDC has announced a review of the basis upon which they rate properties within the District. You may recall that the Russell area pays some of the highest rates in New Zealand. It is evident from the discussion document produced by the Council that it favours some form of capital rather than land value rating, whereby the combined value of your land and all the improvements will be taxed. It is rather unfortunate that the Council has not attempted to undertake a more comprehensive review of the way that it collects its revenue. I would encourage everyone to look on the FNDC web site and to familiarise themselves with the issues. Perhaps I could ask John Agase to share his knowledge of the issue with us.

4. Bay of Islands Sewerage proposal

You will recall that your Society took the lead in opposing this “think big” project whereby the Council proposed to build a mega-sewerage scheme to cater for 50, 000 people in a new “Bay of Islands city, that would include intensification of the whole Russell Peninsula. In this proposal, our new \$13 million sewerage plant would be decommissioned and our sewage would be piped to Opuia via a bridge.

Martin provided a comprehensive 50 point submission at the hearing. A legal point was raised at the hearing as to whether the FNDC application was even legal, given that it provided not details of the treatment plant, its processes or discharge structures. The hearing was adjourned until this legal point could be clarified. Alan Webb, a barrister used on the Paihia High Rise appeal is representing the objectors and further evidence has now been exchanged. The hearing recommences in late January. Again, watch this space.

5. Long Beach Smythe Appeal

Mediation on this appeal broke down when the parties could not agree on a compromise. The issues centre around land stability and the effect that three more sections would have on this unstable site. FNDC employed an independent engineering consultant who recommended against further intensive development of the site. The land owner has employed his own set of consultants to argue that the site can be made stable. The matter goes to a hearing some time in February or March. Martin can comment further.

6. Waitangi Convention Centre proposal

Again, your Society took the lead in mounting a national campaign against an ill considered proposal to build a mammoth convention/visitor centre, restaurants and associated parking in a very obtrusive coastal location adjoining the Treaty House. We issued press releases which were widely reported in the media. As a result the Waitangi Trust received a large number of objections. They have now decided to withdraw their application and to consult with all the parties before deciding what to do. We will keep you advised on this important matter.

7. Cass Street II (Cass Street Revisited?)

People will recall the sterling efforts of Russell 2000 and a handful of other volunteers, who took the design prepared by Harry Turbott and transformed Cass Street into the pleasant place that it is today. It had always been envisaged that this initial project was simply the first stage in a process of integrating the town centre with the wharf and Kororareka Bay in manner which compliments the original town plan for Russell. We were fortunate that Harry Turbott was able to visit the Township again and attend a meeting.

The meeting was useful in clarifying a number of design issues that needed to be addressed. The entry from Cass Street onto the wharf is currently cluttered with inappropriate sign posting, street furniture and bollards. The area needs to be opened up and a common design theme employed to unify the junction of Cass Street, The Strand and the wharf. One option is to replace more of the tarmac with brick paving and relocate many of the extraneous signs while using a common design for critical signage, enhancing the grassy berms and improving access to Kororareka Beach. The issue of pedestrianising The Strand arose and this will be referred to the Russell Business Association for them to canvass their members.

8. FNDC Coastal Access Policy

Martin and Helen drafted a submission to FNDC on this issue. The main concern is that Council already has the power to acquire the "Queens Chain" upon subdivision but has been reluctant often to do so. On the other hand, vehicle access to sensitive coastal sites needs to be carefully controlled in order to avoid environmental impacts. The use of walking tracks is generally supported, with the proviso that high levels of access can result in problems with vandalism, litter and public safety. Martin or Helen may wish to comment further.

9. Far North Holdings and Far North District Council Asset Sales

The new Chairperson of FNH announced his intention of selling off many of their assets, including wharfs and jettys. This was followed by Mayor Brown and Councillor Bowman making a similar call for Council managed assets. This seems to hark back to the bad old days of Rogernomics when the family silverware was sold off. This came to a head recently when the Council attempted to sell a reserve at Doves Bay without consulting the local community. In response to the uproar this created, a Council spokesperson was quoted as saying that this was in fact a success because it enabled the community to belatedly respond. Your Society issued a press release decrying this attempt to sell off key assets that had been built or donated by the community in many instances. Russell is a maritime community and relies heavily on its coastal assets, notwithstanding that these can be sold for high prices to developers.

10. Proposed Changes to RMA

Your Society is a public interest group that takes a very active role by participating in the Resource Management Act processes. We have been reasonably successful in

safeguarding the amenity of historic Russell. This amenity includes the scenic, cultural, economic, aesthetic and historical values that gives Russell Township and its environs its character and pleasantness. It is proposed to limit the issues to be considered to simply physical effects and to also limit who can participate in the process. This could serve to hamstring your Society in its efforts to protect the essential qualities of Russell that are so important to successive generations of New Zealanders.