

# **RUSSELL PROTECTION SOCIETY (INC)**

P O Box 154  
Russell, Bay of Islands

## **Submission on Local Government Structures for Northland**

**Submitter:** Russell Protection Society Ltd.

**Address for Service:** PO Box 154, Russell 0242

## **We wish to be heard in support of our submission**

### **Submission**

#### Background

1. An established principle of democratic government is the need for “checks and balances” in order to ensure fair and sustainable social, economic and environment outcomes. Under the current system of government in New Zealand there is a strong interplay between local and regional authorities on matters associated with resource management, while central government agencies (Ministry for the Environment/Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment) tend to be rather weak and underfunded in this regard. While local government does provide a vehicle for the direct representation of local communities, it can also be prone to capture by special interests. In such a situation it appears that 'growth at any cost' is often perceived as a panacea for addressing the financial constraints facing many Council's, while there is also a tendency to try and 'do things on the cheap' as a way of avoiding the politically unpalatable option of increasing rates.

#### What's wrong with the current system?

2. The key issue here appears to be a breakdown in the relationship between the current Far North District Council and the Northland Regional Council. There has always been a healthy tension between the local, sometimes parochial aspirations of local councils and the broader perspective provided by regional authorities. However there are a number of statutory processes that are provided for these differences to be explored and worked through, with the final arbiter being the Environment Court. There are also various political processes available, using a variety of forums that are very familiar to all politicians. What these processes do not provide for are the resolution of other issues such as personality conflicts.
3. It is claimed that most ratepayers find the various levels of government “confusing”, but this is not substantiated in any documentation. It is also stated that there are too many plans and too much complexity and bureaucracy, but this appears to be double speak that masks the real issue – the

Far North district Council appears to disagree with many of the standards that have been set by the Northland Regional Council. If this is the case, then there is a forum (the Environment Court) for the FNDC to challenge those standards when these are formulated. The inability or unwillingness of the FNDC to conform to these legal standards serves to raise alarm bells about the prospect removing the checks and balances that a regional level of government can provide.

#### The preferred option

4. The MDL report is touted as an “independent report” by the FNDC, however recent media reports have called into question the integrity of this document. What is clear is that the Council embarked upon this process with a strong view as to what the preferred option (a unitary authority for the Far North) should be. This option appears designed to meet the political aspirations of current FNDC councillors rather than addressing the social, economic and environmental needs of ratepayers. For instance, the report chooses not to canvass the option of having a stronger role for regional government in coordinating future growth and associated transport and infrastructure options for Northland because this is clearly politically unpalatable to the FNDC.

#### Will it be better?

5. A major weakness of the MDL report is that no costings of the various options has been done. The report does hypothesize that no savings are likely to be achieved with any of the options that are identified. However we believe that the converse is likely to be true when taking into account the large set up and ongoing running costs. The NRC currently runs on a relatively small budget given the size of its region and therefore provides reasonably good value for the money. By contrast, the FNDC has recently doubled its existing debt level, with no clear plan about how it will repay it other than a faint hope that future, unsustainable growth will somehow provide salvation.

#### Who will look after the fox?

6. There are a number of unfortunate examples of the FNDC trying to do things on the cheap and had it not been for the NRC in its watchdog role this could have resulted in some nasty consequences. For instance, the FNDC attempted to use Russell's small, rural tip as a sanitary landfill for most of the Far North's waste until the NRC determined that such an action was illegal. In another example, the FNDC has attempted to substitute political posturing for proper water planning during the current drought in Northland by seeking to breach its resource consent conditions. This is in a situation where many of Council's water supply systems fail to meet international standards, even during normal conditions. Of particular concern has been Council's performance in managing its wastewater schemes, with many examples of undetected failure and cumulative impacts. The suggestion of using the small Wellington-based Environmental Protection Authority as some sort of “watchdog” is simply not a realistic option.

Is FNDC up to the task?

7. There are a number of factors that must be considered here. These include the FNDC's current budget blow out and level of indebtedness, the recent negative review of its Resource Management Act administration, its almost complete lack of environmental and resource consent condition monitoring, its lack of relevant in-house expertise, its relatively poor management of existing assets and infrastructure, its high staff turnover, and its current lack of cohesiveness because of internal bickering between political factions. The answer to this question must therefore be an unequivocal no. For these reasons it is submitted that there is no obvious imperative for conducting an expensive process aimed at reviewing current local government structures for Northland and that, instead, the Council should focus its resources and energy on improving its own performance and making the current system work properly.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Drey". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bob Drey  
Chairperson  
on behalf of the Russell Protection Society