

# RUSSELL PROTECTION SOCIETY (INC)

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## Submission to the Draft Far North District Plan

### 1. Introduction

- The Russell Protection Society (RPS) has been active in promoting research and dialogue about the future of the historic Russell Township. The Township has been the focus of numerous planning studies and surveys over the years. What is particularly notable is that these studies and surveys are remarkably consistent in terms of how local residents and visitors alike see the future of our Township. Therefore in order to plan for Russell it is first essential that this information is carefully considered and understood.

### 2. Summary of Key Findings

- Landscape Elements of Russell – 1975 (Ministry of Works and Development, Department of Lands and Survey)  
Russell has a sense of “place” or containment and the original Town Plan for the historic Township is still evident. Its distinctive character is molded by its physical setting on a narrow peninsula, an isolated village surrounded by water, the hills and promontories. The Township has developed on a pedestrian scale and the individual buildings are also small scale. The Strand and York Street should be linked using Cass Street (done) and linkages should be retained to Kororareka Bay (proposed). Road widths should be kept to a minimum and details of road edging, berms, footpaths and street furniture should be kept simple. Parking area should be small and discrete.
- Russell Handbook – 1980 (Ministry of works and Development)  
The objective is to preserve the physical and cultural identity of Russell. This can be achieved by using the District Plan to encourage a pedestrian scale while containing growth within defined boundaries. Russell should preserve its links with the surrounding waters. Historic buildings need to be preserved within their appropriate settings. Architecturally appropriate design should be encouraged for the commercial town centre and public works must also be carefully considered. The history of the Township can be brought alive (example Hellhole celebrations) and appropriate landscaping (Russell Landcare and the Russell Gardening Club activities) should be encouraged. The informal blending of land uses should continue in order to maintain the character and village atmosphere. The Handbook suggests certain design *guidelines* for development, including pitched or hipped roofs, leanto’s and gables, appropriate colours, small-scale simple forms, use of weatherboards and corrugated iron, limiting areas of glass, having verandahs, picket fencing, soft landscaping, with one and two story buildings and limiting development on the skylines and promontories.
- Russell Planning Review – 1988 (Dennis Nugent, Jeremy Salmond, et al)  
The character of Russell is dependent upon the size and nature of the community, the landscape, the built form and its history – it has “a sense of place”. Tourism is and should remain the primary industry. Controlling the size and rate of growth of Russell is the key to retaining its character. Accommodation should be based primarily around bed and breakfast style establishments. Home occupations offer the greatest potential for growth in future employment. The generally large section sizes (>1000m<sup>2</sup>) should

be retained. Russell should have a special zoning for the Township and historic precincts should protect the settings of historic buildings/neighbourhoods (done). Different controls are required for the commercial town centre. There is a need for proper interpretation of Russell as NZ's oldest European settlement (example Hellhole activities). Transport to the Township should be encouraged by water (example recent Russell wharf repairs).

- Russell Visitor Research - 2006 (Russell Business Assn)

This was a visitor survey prepared for the Russell Business Association. People were asked what attracted them to Russell and the most popular answers were the history and culture, the scenery and walks, the romantic village, rest and relaxation, beaches and swimming and the remoteness of the location. Visitors came to the Township almost equally by car and boat. The most popular activities while in Russell were sightseeing, eating/drinking, history/culture, rest/relaxation, walking, and boat trips. Most people knew about Russell's attractions before coming here and had an overall good to excellent experience. The most frequent comments made were "keep it as it is", improve toilets (done), more seats (done), pedestrianize The Strand, more promotion and events (done), more litter bins and safeguard the character of the Township and surrounds.

- Russell 2000 Survey – 2008 (Russell 2000 Trust)

A questionnaire was sent to all households in Russell asking people what they wanted the Township to look like in the 2000 millennium. Residents identified Kororareka/Russell as being special and unique because of its historic heritage, its village atmosphere and small town community, its scenic and rural character and its real, genuine and honest attributes. Residents see themselves as guardians of Russell's history, but also as caretakers of Russell's "character", which includes architecture from many eras. The most important factors are a sense of community, the human scale of the town and its small buildings and its pedestrian friendliness. It is described as safe, slow, quiet, and peaceful where people have a strong sense of belonging and protectiveness towards Russell. The natural and rural environment is accorded a high level of importance, as is its scenic beauty. Key concepts listed were geographically isolated and physically contained, giving the Township an island type of ambience. The community is described as caring/friendly/intimate, open minded/diverse and not city or commercially orientated.

- Review of Previous Studies – 2010 (Bob Drey, RPS)

The Russell Protection Society embarked upon a project to help foster a consensus about what the previous studies/surveys mean in terms of defining a future for Russell. The following is an extract from an article that was published in the Russell Lights seeking comment from the community about how they see the future of our community.

*"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 would continue to be provided for through mixed uses, home-based work, cottage industries, arts & crafts, bed & breakfast establishments and small scale tourist industries. Tourism would be mainly as a pedestrian activity that relies primarily upon the special character and historic attractions of the area. The landscape of the Peninsula needs to be protected and enhanced by encouraging more tree planting, preserving open spaces and maintaining key sight corridors to the sea. The narrow, tree lined streets and grassed berms with water tables would 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 colours. Picket fences and minimal setbacks are appropriate; however retention of open spaces and gardens is also important. Alterations to buildings in the historic precincts do need to be 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 located 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. Coastal lands framing Russell, including the two headlands, should be protected from subdivision and development while retaining their natural bush cover. Russell is unique for both its past history and its present character, and therefore the District Plan should reflect this.”*

### **3. Relevance of These Findings**

- As time passes and development pressures grow, the above considerations have become increasingly relevant. In discussing the future of Russell there is a primary need to understand what the “trade-offs” are in terms of balancing demands for greater services and growth with the need to safeguard the essential character of Russell. That is why it is important to first identify what is so important about our Township and then to draw a connection between that and potential public works or other developments that may be contemplated. This informed debate will assist the Council in developing a coherent strategy for an agreed and sustainable future. There is also a corresponding risk that this precious heritage can be lost if the lessons learned are ignored.

### **4. Previous District Plan Review Process**

- Following submissions to the previous Draft Plan from individuals and organisations in Russell, the Council participated in a number of mediation sessions with the submitters. It was agreed at those sessions that the research referred to above had amply demonstrated that Russell is unique within the District and that it warranted a special zone and specific Heritage Precincts that address the three distinct areas within the Township
- Agreement could not be reached regarding the need to safeguard the generally large section sizes, low building height and gateway area that characterise historic Russell. These matters went to Appeal and as a result the Environment Court largely found in favour of the Appellants. The Operative District Plan for Russell is therefore, in part, a result of the Court’s determinations.

### **5. The Operative District Plan:**

- Under the Operative District Plan the context of the existing Russell Township zone is stated as follows: “*Russell occupies a unique place in New Zealand’s past. The historic role of the settlement and its gradual evolution into what we today know as a quiet but popular tourist town have afforded it a special significance. In recognition of that significance the Russell community has indicated a desire for resource management methods that maintain and enhance those characteristics of the natural and physical resources in Russell which contribute to its unique character, its heritage and amenity values*”.
- In terms of specific policy content for Russell, the Plan elaborates on two Issues, two Environmental Outcomes, one Objective and eight Policies (with six subsets), along with a lengthy Commentary that serves to explain the rationale behind this policy development. These are all generally in accordance with the research and surveys discussed above and help to both explain the reasons behind the Rules that have been adopted in the Plan for Russell as well as helping to inform subsequent Resource Consent decision making.
- The important Rules for Russell, consistent with this policy development include:
  - Residential Intensity – 1000m2 sewerred (Permitted Activity)*  
- *800m2 sewerred (Restricted Discretionary)*
  - Building Height – 7.2m (Permitted Activity)*
  - Scale of Activities – 1000m2 per two persons (Permitted Activity)*
  - Building Height (Commercial Area) – 8.5m*
- In addition, Russell has three Heritage Precincts (The Strand, Wellington Street and Christ Church), which have distinct explanations and rules covering each. Particularly important rules for The Strand Heritage Precinct include:
  - Outdoor Advertising – 0.2m2 that relates directly to premise*
  - Heritage Colours – Required list of colours*
  - New Buildings – Not visible to the public*
  - Pedestrian Access – Safeguarded along The Strand*
- The other three Coastal zones (General, Coastal Living and Coastal Residential) are underpinned with extensive policy development that gives effect to the NZ Coastal Policy Statement and is aimed at preservation of the natural character and protection against inappropriate use, subdivision and development. Each of the zones has specific Issues, Environmental Outcomes, Objectives and Policies that are tailored to the protection requirements of that category of land. In addition to this foundation, there is an overlay of Outstanding Landscapes and Outstanding Natural Features. More particularly, these zones create a “greenbelt” around Russell that helps to bookend and define the historic Township plan conceived in London many years ago.
- The important rules for the General Coastal zone, which includes a significant amount of land around Russell include:
  - Residential Intensity – 20ha*
  - Visual Amenity – Buildings 50m2 and colouration controls*
  - Height – 8m*
  - Stormwater Management 10%*

## 6. The Proposed Draft District Plan

- For unexplained reasons the Draft District Plan eliminates the Russell Township zone while retaining other special zones in the Draft Plan. Instead the Draft Plan proposes a “General Residential zone for the historic Russell Township, the same zone that applies to most other urban areas within the District. The purpose of this zone is as follows: ‘*The General Residential zone represents*

*those areas where we expect to see a higher density of residential development and that generally provide a higher level of services..”* The Objectives, Policies and Rules generally follow this theme and aim at a higher intensity of development.

- In particular, the following rules give expression to this:
  - Residential Intensity – 600m<sup>2</sup> Sewered*
  - Restricted Discretionary – 300m<sup>2</sup>*
  - In some circumstances, these rules may be relaxed*
  - Height – 8m*
  - Height (Mixed Use zone) - 12m*
  - Helicopter Landing Areas provided for?*
- The three distinct Heritage Precincts have been replaced by a blanket “Heritage Area” that lacks detailed policy development and rules, especially for The Strand Heritage Precinct, where visibility, colouration and signage controls previously applied.
- The proposed Draft District Plan also eliminates the other three existing coastal zones (General, Coastal Living, Coastal Residential) and the associated Issues, Environmental Outcomes, Objectives and Policies specific to each zone in favour of vague overarching statements that are intended to apply to coastal areas without adequately defining what these are. In that situation the underlying urban and rural zoning rules provisions will likely predominate in any consideration of subdivision and use. The strategy of having another party (the NRC) define those limited areas of the coastline worthy of protection serves to imply that the rest of the coastal areas in Northland are open for further development.

## 7. Analysis

- The proposed Draft District Plan appears to ignore previous planning studies, surveys, mediations, Environment Court decisions and the NZ Coastal Policy Statement in favour of a desire for more intensive development in its District, irrespective of the impact this would have on the character and heritage values of particular communities such as Russell. It has not provided any explanation for this.
- Just to be clear, the National Policy Statement On Urban Development (NPS-UD) does NOT apply to Russell because the threshold is 10,000 plus population in urban centres and our historic township does not even approach that number. In terms of the National Planning Standards (2019), the Township of Russell qualifies under Direction 3 for a Special Zone or perhaps a Settlement or Low Density Residential zone, but clearly not a General Residential zone.
- The more intensive development of Russell’s urban and commercial areas, as provided for by the General Residential and Mixed Use zones, will have very specific impacts on the character and historical values of Russell. It is important to acknowledge that individual historic buildings in Russell have value mainly *because these are located within an appropriate setting*. Likewise, the present character of Russell is largely dependent upon its village atmosphere and the large lots and small, low buildings found there.
- With the lot sizes more than halved (300m<sup>2</sup> Restricted Discretionary) in the Draft District Plan it is likely that more subdivision of existing sections would occur along with infill housing and as a result the backdrop to historic building would be compromised and the character of Russell would likely evolve to be like any other urban town in the District. The lack of a specific policy direction for Russell would simply aid this inevitable process.

- Removal of the existing coastal zones would also serve to undermine the greenbelt or buffer around the Russell while promoting urban ribbon development. The boundary of the historic Township would become confused and place more pressure on a struggling infrastructure.
- The Russell Sewerage System is designed to service a limited, defined area and population. It is based around the use of deep bore disposal, which can be very problematic when not managed and maintained properly. Russell also lacks a community water system, which most residents do not wish to fund because they have already invested in the own individual systems. The Township also lacks adequate parking facilities. In brief, Russell does not meet the stated criteria for the General Residential zone.

## **8. Relief Sought**

- The Russell Protection Society asks that the Russell Township zone and its accompanying policy framework and rules be reinstated and strengthened, as well as the three Historic Precincts. This also includes the previous height limit of 8m for commercial buildings. Likewise, we ask that the Coastal zones, particularly the General Coastal zone, be restored in order to protect the boundaries of historic Russell and to comply with the NZ Coastal Policy Statement.
- Our Society has invested considerable time and resources in order to ensure that the present character of historic Russell is safeguarded for future generations to enjoy. The Society promotes the wise development of our historic Township, where subdivision and use has regard to the existing constraints and opportunities that distinguish Russell from other communities. Simply promoting higher density residential development in Russell and its surrounds while ignoring all the planning that has occurred previously is irresponsible in our view.
- The Russell Protection Society asks the Far North District Council and its Planners to urgently convene a public meeting in Russell so that the local community can better understand the proposed Draft District Plan and can provide informed submissions where appropriate. This is considered to be a better alternative than having to challenge the proposed Draft District Plan in the Environment Court because it does not respect the past history and present character of Russell.



Bob Drey  
Chairperson  
Russell Protection Society

Address for Service: As above