



P O Box 224  
Carterton 5743

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Sir Wira Gardiner KNZM  
Chair  
Local Government Commission  
PO Box 5362  
Wellington 6140

Dear Sir Wira

## Local Government in the Wairarapa

### Introduction

Wairarapa Voice has been formed to provide a means by which local voices can raise the level and quality of local input to decisions on local government.

We have deep concerns about the Local Government Commission's (LGC) ***Draft Proposal for Wairarapa District Council combining South Wairarapa District Council, Carterton District Council and Masterton District Council.***

There have been two recent attempts to change the structure of local government in the Wairarapa. These received less than full acclaim from our ratepayers, citizens and local communities.

Wairarapa Voice is not opposed to the aggregation of Wairarapa local government resources where there are gains of efficiency or effectiveness from doing so and where doing so does not lower levels of representation or increase risks to ratepayers.

We have reviewed and considered many of the submissions made to the LGC on the draft proposal to see if there is any new information that should cause us to alter our views on the proposal. Our people also heard many of the oral submissions made to the Commission during the public hearings and the responses of yourself and the other commissioners to a range of the matters raised.

We have not discovered anything from our work that alters our view that the proposed structural changes will not deliver efficiency or effectiveness benefits for the Wairarapa and that the proposed changes carry significant transition and on-going risks to our ratepayers.

In this paper we set out some background matters and summarise the reasons why the current proposal to create a new single Wairarapa District Council should not proceed.

In our view there are some areas in which local government in the Wairarapa can be improved but none of these require structural change.

## Background Matters

The Wairarapa:

- Covers a significant land mass of 8,423 sq km, almost 80% of the Wellington Region. It has significant geographic and climatic diversity, and opportunities and challenges for all manner of human activity.
- Is essentially a valley, centred on the Ruamahanga River, vulnerable to the limits of drainage and the water holding capacity of the soil. The culture of our communities and the resilience of our peoples reflect this.
- Contains a population of some 43,500 that is spread, thinly by most measures, across five main towns and the balance across smaller inland and coastal communities.
- Has a highly productive rural sector covering sheep, beef, dairying, cropping, forestry, fruit, wine and general market produce.
- Has a highly productive coastal fishing fleet based in Ngawi.
- Is a growing life-style destination with positive impacts on construction and agricultural services, along with small businesses and is increasingly on the tourism map as are its sporting and creative activities.
- Has a light and growing industrial sector which, beyond the supply of services to support local production, “exports” products to other areas e.g. farm machinery and heavy steel fabrications to Wellington and the Manawatu and further afield.
- Is attracting some hi-tech investors – entertainment and social media and people with hi-tech skills who work in clusters (virtual or otherwise) or from home, utilising modern communications/technology services.

Wairarapa towns and communities each have their own valued heritage and distinctive social, environmental and economic characteristics and challenges shaped by the above points.

These distinctive characteristics and valued heritages are at threat through externally imposed uniform standards and processes, often cited as ‘Best Practice’. ‘Best Practice’ is typically the view of a group of people about a process or standard in a single or a few given situations. It does not mean that it is relevant to all situations in the nature of a universal truth.

We strongly believe that, for the Wairarapa, ‘Best Practice’ is in fact only best practice when it is relevant considering the social, environmental and economic context. Each of our communities values its heritage, culture and distinctive character which we are not prepared to sacrifice to accommodate ‘Best Practices’ invented elsewhere to create an irrelevant sameness across our Wairarapa.

We continue to harbour doubts about the extent to which these facts and values have been adequately understood and taken into account in the formulation of the current proposal.

## The Draft Proposal

Schedule 3 of the Local Government Act 2002 sets out specific criteria that a reorganisation proposal must meet. The Commission is specifically required to be satisfied that its preferred option:

- (a) will best promote the purpose of local government; and**
- (b) will facilitate improved economic performance, which may include—**
  - (i) efficiencies and cost savings; and**
  - (ii) productivity improvements, both within the local authorities and for the businesses and households that interact with those local authorities; and**
  - (iii) simplified planning processes within and across the affected area through, for example, the integration of statutory plans or a reduction in the number of plans to be prepared or approved by a local authority.**

The purpose of local government specified in Section 10 of the Local Government Act is:

- (a) to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and**
- (b) to meet the current and future needs of communities for good-quality local infrastructure, local public services, and performance of regulatory functions in a way that is most cost-effective for households and businesses.**

Section 10 also defines “good quality” in relation to local infrastructure, local public services, and performance of regulatory functions, as meaning **infrastructure, services, and performance that are efficient; and effective; and appropriate to present and anticipated future circumstances.**

The requirement that any proposal to change the structure of Local Government must result in increased efficiency or effectiveness does not appear to be met by the draft proposal.

The proposal does not define with any level of specificity the Wairarapa local government problems or opportunities. It does not specify the gains that would flow from the proposed structural changes. It does not identify and quantify the risks from adoption of the proposal that would pass to ratepayers including:

- Reduced representation, reduced local control, and reduced service delivery responsiveness.
- The exposure of Carterton and South Wairarapa ratepayers to debt of the Masterton District Council. While limited ring fencing proposals have been made, there is no binding obligation on the Transition Body or the resulting District Council to adopt them.
- The addition of political risk and division between the North and South of Wairarapa to the detriment of the whole of the Wairarapa.

As presented to the public, the draft proposal is superficial. The proposal speaks with authority that is not justified. It is short on detail and is not supported by facts, the LGC’s own working papers, or its research and consultations. The nature of these deficits and omissions is such that the draft proposal lacks the levels of disclosure and objectivity necessary for ratepayers to make informed decisions on its value.

Closer examination of the proposal reveals:

1. Errors, omissions and assumptions in the financial data and projections including:
  - a. Inaccurate transition costs and an inadequate quality of work on the identification of IT costs.
  - b. The omission of any assessment of the impacts of Masterton's membership of the LGFA on the ratepayers of Carterton and South Wairarapa.
2. Planned decreased levels of representation and the exposure of the ratepayers of Carterton and the towns of the South Wairarapa to domination by the Masterton District ratepayers and representatives.
3. The proposed creation of a central bureaucracy in Masterton, the most Northerly town of any size in the Wairarapa, and the extensive consolidation of operations. There is only speculation that this rearrangement will deliver benefits and there is no plan or evidence that specific improvements to service delivery efficiency and effectiveness will be realised.
4. The proposal appears to assume that bigger is better. This is not supported by any adduced evidence and when the operations of the GWRC in the Wairarapa are considered it can be strongly suggested that the opposite is true.

## Conclusions

- The draft proposal of the LGC does not identify any significant current problems or specific opportunities for local government efficiency or effectiveness gains for the Wairarapa.
- Many of the assertions made in the draft proposal are not supported by facts.
- The draft proposal weakens local democracy.
- The governance and delivery of Wairarapa wide services does not require structural change. There is already an abundance of history in the Wairarapa (and elsewhere in New Zealand) of area wide service delivery and problem solving that has not required top down imposed structural change.
- Based on our analysis of the current LGC proposal and our collective knowledge of the Wairarapa and its communities, we continue to hold the view that the current proposal will not improve the efficiency or the effectiveness of local government in the Wairarapa.

Accordingly, we consider that the Commission should not proceed with its draft proposal.

## Recommendation

Wairarapa Voice recommends that the Local Government Commission abandon its Draft Proposal for Wairarapa District Council combining South Wairarapa District Council, Carterton District Council and Masterton District Council.



Mike Osborne  
Spokesperson for Wairarapa Voice