

INTRODUCTION

The debate about the future of local government in Northland has been hotting up in recent months.

An expensive report and a series of publications and advertisements has put forward the case for two unitary authorities, favoured by the Far North and Whāngārei District Councils. However, they are just two of four local government bodies representing Northland ratepayers.

Northland Regional Council agrees that we should always be striving to improve local government service delivery within the present structure. However, we believe a lot of misinformation has been circulated about this and that the current drive for unitary authorities simply isn't in the best interests of ordinary Northlanders.

In fact all four local authorities in Northland already work closely together across numerous areas, including infrastructure and transport. We agree there are other ways in which we could work even more closely together, but it doesn't need a costly reorganisation of local government. We could do more now for little extra cost.

All that's really required is a shared desire to work together for everyone's benefit and the benefit of Northland as a whole.

Local government reorganisation – the costs?

FACT There are no known examples worldwide where services have been delivered more cheaply when Councils have been merged. No real work has been done on the cost of any changes to local government in Northland.

How would my rates be affected?

FACT Northland Regional Council rates are among the lowest in New Zealand and we are debt-free. Any transfer of ratepayer assets away from the Regional Council will almost certainly result in an increase in rates, due to the roughly quarter billion dollars debt collectively owed already by the Far North and Whāngārei District Councils.

The future of local government in Northland – THE FACTS

What about the Councils' assets – would combining them save me money?

FACT As a ratepayer, you already own the assets of all four Councils. However, some Councils are better at looking after these assets for you than others. The Regional Council has cautiously and prudently maintained – and grown – your assets over many years. Your current Regional Council rates bills would be about 30 percent higher without the returns from these investments.

What about the environment? Can a unitary authority successfully be both 'poacher' and 'gamekeeper'?

FACT In Northland, the Far North and Whāngārei District Councils have commented publicly about the value the Regional Council places on Northland's environment and have complained that our standards are too high. They suggest independent commissioners could be used to issue resource consents. **Question:** Who will monitor resource consents to make sure the environment is protected if a unitary authority structure is adopted? District Councils have been prosecuted in the past for repeatedly allowing raw sewage to flow into Northland harbours – will they prosecute themselves?

Wouldn't planning be simpler under unitary authorities?

FACT Rather than simplifying planning, the two unitary authorities model currently being promoted by the Far North and Whāngārei District Councils will lead to duplication of all the documents the Regional Council is legally required to produce.

Question: How much confusion will be caused – and money wasted – by having two Regional Policy Statements, two Coastal Plans or two Water and Soil Plans?

Auckland is being restructured. Shouldn't we be prepared?

FACT Central Government has repeatedly stressed it's not interested in even considering pushes by other Councils for unitary authorities until the Auckland SuperCity is up and running.

Central Government has also indicated it plans to reform (next year) the Local Government Act, under which all Councils operate. Existing Councils will be consulted.

Wasn't the Regional Council initially in favour of reviewing the way local government services are delivered in Northland?

FACT Yes. In fact, we suggested it. However, it quickly became clear the Far North and Whāngārei District Councils were directing the authors of the **McKinlay Douglas Report on Local Government Options for Northland** to achieve the results those Councils wanted.

We withdrew at an early stage because we believed the resulting report would not be independent or based on what's best for Northland and its people.

Were the consultants influenced to come up with the results they did?

FACT Report author Peter McKinlay publicly acknowledged "the process had been complicated by Whangarei Mayor Stan Semenoff and Far North Mayor Wayne Brown saying from the beginning there should be two unitary authorities".

Information we received under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act shows Peter McKinlay saying the two unitary authorities option his report ultimately recommended was, in fact, the "least favoured" and he questions whether a Far North unitary authority is likely to be financially viable.

What's in Northland's best interests?

FACT Northland Regional Council believes all four Councils should put aside their differences and work together to 'put Northland first'. A costly reorganisation is not needed – just the will to work together for the benefit of Northland ratepayers. Any change should be about what's best for Northland. We need to be united as a region – not divided.

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The Northland Regional Council aims to create a region of choice through growth, and the provision of regional leadership, environmental protection, economic opportunities and integrated infrastructure. We will achieve this by putting our community and region first. We are committed to being forward thinking and innovative, flexible and open, responsive and value-driven, and professional and accountable. We also work with others – regional and central government, iwi, community groups, development agencies and commercial enterprises – to meet these goals.

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