

NELSON CITY COUNCIL SUBMISSION ON A PROPOSAL FOR THE UNION OF NELSON CITY AND TASMAN DISTRICT

Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on a proposal for the Union of Nelson City and Tasman District.

This submission was approved by the Nelson City Council at its meeting of 2 December 2010.

This submission is in support of proceeding with an investigation into a proposal for the union of Nelson City and Tasman District. The reasons are centred around:

- The need for a Unitary Authority to reflect the collective hopes and desires of the Province of Nelson
- Improving the efficiency and timeliness of decision making
- Supporting and improving representation for communities of interest
- Economies of scale
- The residents of Nelson and Tasman having a say in the future governance of the region
- The ability for the Nelson Province to rise to central government aspirational goals for New Zealand.

These reasons are discussed in more detail in sections 1 to 7 below where we respond to the seven questions of the local Government Commission in relation to a proposal for the union of Nelson City and Tasman District.

Nelson City Council supports further investigation into a proposal for the union of Nelson City and Tasman District and the residents of Nelson City, Tasman District and the wider public having a say on the future of the region.

Nelson City Council recommends the two councils hold discussions between May and August 2011 on how a proposal could work. It is fundamental that the discussion on the proposed union is not just conducted by elected representatives and staff from the two affected authorities. The proposed timeframe allows for extensive public debate to be conducted on the topic so that the community can give this matter its considered opinion.

Introduction

Nelson is a Province in its own right. The current structure of the two councils, with sometimes competing priorities, does not automatically lend itself to cohesive and sensible decisions that might benefit the region as a whole.

On many fronts the Nelson-Tasman region is one social, environmental economic and cultural unit. From the outside it is seen as one joined-up area, for example as a destination, as a sporting province and as a provider of goods and services (e.g. health, transport and education). From the inside there are many examples of community points of difference. Equally from the inside, the lack of a single Unitary Authority is evident by the many 'innovative' structures and processes that seek to provide common responses and priorities to regional issues, such as the Nelson City Council-Tasman District Council Joint Shareholders Committee and the Regional Funding Forum.

Nelson City Council's priorities for Nelson include putting Nelson's regional identity on the national radar, environmental sustainability, building strong relationships with iwi/māori, sustainable economic development, development of community facilities and infrastructure and our regional relationships, especially with Tasman District Council. All of these priorities have a strong focus on the Nelson-Tasman region as an integrated whole and, in part, rely on a fully integrated regional approach in order to be successful and provide benefits across the region.

In addition, there is a consistent message from central government that New Zealand should be working towards achieving a safe, prosperous and successful New Zealand that creates opportunities for all New Zealanders. The current model of two councils might not be enabling our region to fully contribute towards this aspirational goal. Nelson City Council realises that there are challenges in amalgamating two councils and that there is a balance to be achieved between local representation, building strength in community identity and improving our contribution as a region towards this goal for New Zealand.

Nelson City Council feels that, regardless of the outcome of any proposal, the residents of Nelson City, Tasman District and the wider public should be able to have a say on the future of the region. For this reason Nelson City Council supports further investigation into a proposal for the union of Nelson City and Tasman District.

With the local government elections being held only two months ago there has not been an opportunity for the two councils to discuss the pros and cons of a single council or alternative governance options. Accordingly, Nelson City Council feels that it is fundamental that a period of time between May and August 2011 be factored into the process to allow the two councils to hold discussions on how a proposal could work and to encourage face to face discussions with their community.

Discussion

1. How would the proposed district/regions better recognise distinct communities of interest?

- 1.1. As part of developing a proposal, communities of interest and their supporting community boards would need to be considered. Nelson City Council supports a community board structure that allows for the recognition of distinct communities of interest and with the delegations and resources to carry out effective decision making to meet their particular needs and aspirations.
- 1.2. At the moment Nelson Province is one community of interest and there might be the option to provide the distinct areas of Nelson Province with improved opportunities to develop their unique identities as 'villages' within a greater provincial area.

2. How would the proposal provide for more effective representation of communities of interest?

- 2.1. As with 1 above, the establishment of community boards might see improved representation of communities of interest throughout the region.
- 2.2. Nelson City Council supports the Commission considering options for Māori representation to increase their participation in local government decision making.

3. Why would the proposal provide for more effective governance of the districts/regions concerned including meeting decision making requirements?

- 3.1. The proposal would allow for a single decision making framework for the region that would result in consistency of approach and timeliness of decision making. Currently, decisions being made for the region as a whole experience delays and the quality of decisions is affected due to the two councils working independently but needing to reach consensus, or one council decision being conditional on a parallel decision by the other council. Examples include Saxton Field recreation facilities, separate regional land transport committees and regional wastewater facilities.
- 3.2. The strategic issues would be discussed region wide at the one table. Local issues, which tend to dominate smaller authorities, would be referred to the affected community boards for decisions.
- 3.3. The proposal would achieve a better balance between the needs of the whole region through a single decision making framework for regional matters while maintaining and meeting the needs of distinct communities of interest.
- 3.4. The proposal would also provide more certainty and clarity for residents and organisations who seek to work at a regional level.

4. Why would the proposal facilitate more effective planning for meeting the immediate and long-term needs of the districts/regions concerned?

- 4.1. The current boundary between the two council areas does not encourage the community to see the region as a common area of interest for important activities such as long term planning, resource planning, and the potential to share infrastructure. However Nelson and Tasman share the same wider environment, especially air, marine and freshwater environments, and are tightly linked through the flow of resources and the goods and services that move between the two politically separate areas. It might be easier and more meaningful to prepare a single spatial plan or a regional land use or transport strategy under one authority for the region. Planning and decision making could see the region as one whole so that priorities could be established for meeting the long-term needs of the region.
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- 4.2. The proposal would also result in providing the balance needed between having an overall vision for a region that needs to be working together to ensure the future of all its residents, while providing improved local planning for communities of interest. It would result in empowered community boards with delegated authority and resources to make local decisions for their communities.

5. How would the proposal facilitate more efficient and effective service delivery in the districts/regions concerned?

- 5.1. Service delivery is one area where it should be expected that significant gains could be achieved through a union. By having one planning and asset management framework, a consistent administration and funding approach could be delivered across the region for infrastructure, waste, transport, community and regulatory services.
- 5.2. There would be opportunities to provide better service delivery and reduce costs through having single contracts for services for the whole region. It could potentially rationalise the infrastructure to support services, reducing duplications like each of the councils operating a landfill.
- 5.3. There is the potential for procurement advantages due to tendering larger contracts and reducing demand issues. Currently, the two councils tender similar contracts at the same time, for example roading, stormwater improvements and recycling services.

6. How would the proposal provide for enhanced financial capacity in the districts/regions concerned?

- 6.1. Nelson City Council believes the proposal is more significantly about having one vision, consistency of decision making and service delivery for the whole region. This proposal is not only to achieve cost savings, although there might be some operational savings through economies of scale and greater capacity for supporting all service delivery in the region.
- 6.2. Currently, each council sets its own priorities, but these might not necessarily be the right priorities for the region as a whole. An amalgamated council would consider these regional priorities and develop a work programme to reflect these. It would also enable the Nelson Province to address its role to deliver on national goals set by central government. It is acknowledged that Nelson City Council has a lower forecast debt level than Tasman District Council. An amalgamated council with 100,000 residents would have a lower debt level per resident, all other things being equal, and this might benefit the region as financial institutions would look at the average debt and servicing of debt per capita, even if the rating policies were structured using targeted rates.

7. How would the proposal provide for enhanced local government management and organisational capacity in the districts/regions?

- 7.1. The proposal would support enhanced organisational capacity through having one management team, one philosophy and a unified consistent approach.
- 7.2. One larger Council would be able to employ a wider range of specialist skills, allowing for improved and higher quality analysis, policy advice and response to issues.
- 7.3. A larger Council has the potential to be more attractive as an employment proposition and could therefore attract more staff with excellent skills, qualifications and experience. There could also be the potential for better upskilling and professional development opportunities.
- 7.4. It would allow for the development and delivery of integrated policy and planning functions, providing efficiency in planning and service delivery.

Conclusion

Nelson City Council supports further investigation by the Local Government Commission into a proposal for the union of Nelson City and Tasman District. This would allow the community and elected representatives to make an informed judgment as to whether a union proposal is in the best interests of the region's residents and ratepayers.

Time for discussion of a proposal by Nelson City Council and Tasman District Council needs to be provided within the process to give the two councils the opportunity to talk about possible options and ways of working.