

Representation submission

Good afternoon your Worship and Councillors and thank you for the opportunity to address you on this important matter. I apologise to you in advance for the poor quality of my voice at present. The after effects of pneumonia sometimes leave me breathless when I am speaking but I hopeful that I will not need to ask for your forbearance.

My name is David McPherson. I was a resident of Rotorua County when it amalgamated with the City to become Rotorua District. After amalgamation, voting was based on geographic wards, as Councillor Maxwell will remember, and if my memory serves me correctly, he represented the Eastern Ward.

The current proposal though, is for ethnic based, rather than geographic based wards which is disappointing. Maori people appear to be doing far better with the current system than mere proportional representation will achieve for them, and having ethnic wards is likely to create resentment by some voters at their reduced choice, and also result in fewer Maori councillors than we have now. However that position is now behind us and the current issue is to make the new ward system work democratically.

The main points of my submission are:

- 1 The number of councillors should be increased to 18.
- 2 Equality of franchise is important for democracy and for trust and confidence in our voting system.
- 3 It is possible for our community board system to work even better for people in the Lakes and Rural Board areas.

I am a strong believer in government by the people, for the people. That means devolving power to the lowest possible levels. Community Boards are an excellent example of this and should be supported as much as possible. The Southland District Council, while obviously not having the legal authority to devolve financial authority to its Boards, had a policy of never overruling their decisions. If a Board wanted additional local works, above what would be allocated to their area under the District policy, the Council would approve them, subject to those costs being met by a local rate in that Board area. It meant that any 'wish lists' from a Board would be tempered by the reality of local acceptance of the benefits arising. I strongly support the retention of our community boards. In my written submission, I suggested having another two or three members on each Board so that they could better understand the aspirations of their local communities.

Moving now to the primary issues, it is notable that the wording in the Council advertisement in the Daily Post inviting submissions on its proposal referred to (quote) "fair and effective representation" rather than "democratic and effective representation". Fairness is a very subjective concept. As a Council chief executive once said when referring to submissions on a rating review, most ratepayers believe that a fair rating system is one where my rates go down and yours go up. I am concerned that this type of thinking may have had too much input into the representation system that the Council has proposed, rather than a system seeking equality of franchise.

It is disappointing that the Council appears to have given minimal consideration to increasing the number of councillors. In the past, ratepayers have generally supported having fewer councillors because of a perceived cost saving. However that reasoning no longer holds because the beauty of the current regulations is that councillor costs are now drawn from a fixed pot and costs remain the same in total, regardless of councillor numbers. Councils in the past have also argued for fewer numbers on the grounds of efficiency of decision making. The flaw in this is that it logically follows that the most efficient form of government is dictatorship, that is, government by only one person, as it eliminates the time taken by reasoning and discussion of alternative views. Conversely, democracy is less efficient for the opposite reasons. However the great advantage of democracy is that it results in better decisions because the people who are most affected by the outcomes are more involved in achieving them. The current number of 10 councillors means that there is very little diversity in our representation. Speaking as an outsider whose main view of the Council comes from information in the Daily Post, it appears that there are no more than 3 thought leaders on this body. If we had a greater number of councillors, we could have a greater variety of views presented with the better ones then being developed to give a higher quality of decision making. This is much more difficult to achieve with our limited representation. This review is the golden opportunity to bring a greater variety of views to the decision making table by having an increased number of councillors with the associated diverse life experience and a closer affinity with the community you represent.

My experience when I lived in Southland District was of a council that tried to achieve consensus by working through issues, regardless of what factions may or may not have existed at the start of a discussion on any topic. As an aside, it was also notable that a losing candidate in mayoral races generally became the deputy mayor, something that helped create mutual respect for all councillors.

In my written submission I recommended that your original Option 1 (that is, 10 councillors with 7 from the General Ward and 3 from the Maori Ward) be adopted, slightly modified to include 18 councillors. My reason for proposing the figure of 18 rather than something slightly lower is that it is the perfect number for a 72:28 ratio, that is to say, a 13:5 split of ward councillors. This provides the greatest equality of franchise for all electors. 13 councillors for 55,600 residents in the General Ward means 4,277 residents per councillor while 5 councillors for 21,700 residents in the Maori Ward means 4,340 residents per councillor. The deviation from the mean of 4,294 residents per councillor is well under 1% in each case. By contrast, the Council's proposed option is so far from an even split (47% and 24% deviations) that any appeal to the Local Government Commission would almost certainly succeed. It is noteworthy that it only takes one objection to the Commission for it to take the decision making out of the Council's hands and its past record indicates that equality of franchise is its primary focus. The onus is therefore on the Council to come up with an improved model, which reflects the aspirations of the Rotorua community and will also survive any examination by the Commission.

Thank you for listening to me. I trust that you will take up the two main proposals I have put to you – more councillors for better and more diverse representation, and also to achieve a more democratic split between the two wards. This will better enable us to achieve a sustainable result rather than one imposed on us from an outside body.

I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.