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KURA CHALLENGES AIRPORT'S OPPOSITION TO DEVELOPMENT

Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Ruamata is challenging Rotorua Airport's opposition to plans for its kura, questioning why an established Māori education community is facing barriers to development after decades of operating alongside the airport.

Tumuaki Dr Cathy Dewes says the airport's position is difficult to reconcile with the kura's longstanding presence, previous aviation safety assessments and the measures already undertaken to address aircraft noise.

In its submission dated 17 August, Rotorua Airport stated that in "other global jurisdictions" the kura would not be "granted consent to operate at all, in its current location".

Dr Dewes says the statement is particularly troubling because it appears to question not simply the proposed development, but the kura's right to exist in its current location.

"Our kura has operated here for approximately 40 years. We have educated generations of tamariki, complied with requirements placed upon us and worked to ensure our learning environment is safe and appropriate.

"To suggest that our kura should not be operating here at all is deeply concerning, particularly when we are simply seeking to provide the facilities our tamariki deserve."

Dr Dewes points to previous Civil Aviation Authority determinations that the kura does not constitute an aviation hazard, along with aircraft-noise insulation measures undertaken by the kura and marae under Condition 15 of the earlier resource consent.

She says no aviation incident or complaint arising from the kura's activities has been identified over approximately four decades of operating beneath the flight path.

Dr Dewes acknowledges the importance of aviation safety and supports the independent aeronautical assessment being sought as part of the current consent process.

However, she believes the airport's opposition must be considered against the actual evidence, the kura's established presence and the rights of tamariki to receive a quality education.

"We are not asking for special treatment. We are asking for our tamariki to have the same access to safe, modern and appropriate educational facilities as every other child in Rotorua.

"We accept that aviation safety must be taken seriously. But those concerns need to be supported by evidence and considered alongside the educational needs and rights of our tamariki."

A history that cannot be ignored

Dr Cathy Dewes says the current dispute is made more significant by the history of the land on which Rotorua Airport was established.

Long before the airport existed, the whenua at Rotokawa was occupied by Ngāti Uenukukōpako, whose people maintained settlements, cultural practices and an enduring relationship with the shores of Lake Rotorua.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, ancestral Māori land was compulsorily acquired by the Crown and local authorities for the development of the aerodrome.

The acquisition forced whānau from their settlement at Karamuramu and contributed to the loss of culturally significant places and resources, including traditional birthing and healing baths.

These were places of deep spiritual and cultural importance, where generations of whānau maintained practices associated with childbirth, healing and wellbeing.

The history of the land acquisitions and the significance of Karamuramu Baths were subsequently recognised through the Affiliate Te Arawa Iwi and Hapu Claims Settlement Act 2008.

"Our marae and our people were here long before Rotorua Airport. Our whenua was taken to make way for its construction, our whānau were displaced, and places of enormous cultural and spiritual significance were lost," Dr Dewes says.

"That history matters because we are now facing opposition from an airport built on land our people were forced to give up."

Dr Dewes says the sacrifices made by earlier generations for the development of Rotorua must be acknowledged when considering the future of education on its ancestral whenua.

"Our people have already paid a significant price for the development of this airport. We should not now be expected to compromise the educational opportunities of our tamariki."

Council must take responsibility

Dr Dewes is calling on Rotorua Lakes Council, as the owner of Rotorua Airport, to take an active role in resolving the dispute.

She says the Council has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to Māori education, its relationship with mana whenua and its responsibilities to the wider Rotorua community.

Dr Dewes is asking the Council to engage directly with Ruamata and request that Rotorua Airport withdraw its opposition to the application.

She says the issue is not about preventing the airport from operating or developing, but about ensuring that both organisations can coexist.

"We recognise the airport's importance to Rotorua. We are not opposed to its operations, and we have no desire to compromise aviation safety.

"But the airport must also recognise that it operates on whenua with a history, and alongside a community whose rights, aspirations and wellbeing deserve equal consideration."

The Ministry of Education and School Property Agency are responsible for progressing the current application, with independent aeronautical expertise being sought to assist the consenting process.

Dr Dewes supports that process and remains committed to finding a constructive solution.

"Our tamariki deserve an education that is grounded in their reo, their tikanga on their own whenua."

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Media Contact: Kereama Wright, 027 646 1840