

Conflict in Paradise - Where do we want to go?

A Local Government Perspective – Rural Subdivision

Introduction

Ask four people in the street ‘what is the role of local government’ and they will tell you four different things. Not that long ago you would have probably had a general consensus that local government’s responsibilities lay firmly with infrastructure; roads, water, sewerage and with amenities; libraries, swimming pools and parks. With any luck, someone may have mentioned town planning as well. Central Government wasn’t even convinced that we could manage these responsibilities well. Then along came the Local Government Act 2002 which shook it all up and gave us ‘The Power of General Competence’ – well, maybe? With this came the new bible, the four well-beings. Local government was now responsible for contributing to the social, economic, environmental and cultural health of its communities as well as picking up the rubbish. So what does this mean in a rural context? When teamed with the Resource Management Act, what significant shifts has it caused in the impact of the “Council” on peoples lives? The effects have been far reaching and public expectations have changed. Councils, particularly in the rural area, are now expected to provide for a wide range of lifestyles. Key impact of this is seen in land use. Should support of these choices involve the cutting up of productive rural land?

What’s happening at the moment?

The Local Government Act 2002 *Part 2 s14*

g: a local authority should ensure prudent stewardship and the efficient and effective use of its resources in the interests of its district or region; and

h: in taking a sustainable development approach, a local authority should take into account-

(i) the social, economic and cultural well-being of people and communities; and

(ii) the need to maintain and enhance the quality of the environment; and

(iii) the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations

The problem facing rural communities, especially those close to a metropolitan centre, start right here when we try to determine just what is effective and efficient use of resources? There is any number of examples throughout New Zealand where prime productive land has been covered with houses. The Lower Hutt Valley is one

historical one and Otaki a more recent example of land being cut up into lifestyle blocks. Both represent extensions of urban areas but are they efficient or effective? The answer will depend on your perspective.

Modern urban design encourages infill and efficient use of land for housing. Sections have become smaller and smaller and the 'quarter acre dream' is just that, a dream from days gone by. Even if land is available, the cost of larger sections put them out of reach of many. On top of this, greenfield developments are encouraged to be close to town centres, service infrastructure and nodes of transport that is the outskirts of existing towns. This is considered efficient use of land. Unfortunately this land is also often highly productive which is why the town grew there in the first place. They grew in the proximity of good land not waste land. The value of the land for development becomes hugely greater than its traditional productive or economic value (unless you're a dairy farmer) so is it any wonder that it is sold for subdivision.

How did we get here?

It was not that long ago that the term 'lifestyle block' had never been heard of. People referred to farmlets or 10 acres blocks because they were simply that – 10 acres. It was considered enough to hold a horse or two, run a few sheep and even make a living off if you grew berries or apples. But 10 acres requires a lot of work, even capital investment in stock or machinery if the land is to be farmed and kept in good order. For people working full time in other employment it becomes their second job. We were told by the developers that this size block was too big for most people; it was inefficient use of land. So along came the next craze, the five acre block or two hectares once we changed to metric measurement. We were told this was a much better size as people really only wanted enough room for a pony and a vegetable garden. It required less land and met the needs of those who wanted a quiet place in the country. It also provided a lifeline to farmers in the mid 1980's when rural subsidies were removed and interest rates went through the roof. There is no doubt that the smaller block struck a chord with the townies searching for the good life and the rise in popularity of the lifestyle block began.

The mid-eighties were a time of turmoil for rural New Zealand as town after town suffered the ignominy of having their banks, stock and station agents, post offices and shops closed. Nationwide businesses 'centralised' and people left small towns in droves as their jobs disappeared. By the nineties it was common to see rural town up and down New Zealand with main streets full of empty shops. Property values plummeted and these places often became the homes for beneficiaries and criminals as the rents were cheap.

So what has happened to reverse the trend? Certainly the advent of lifestyle block subdivisions and their ability to attract people has helped. The interesting thing is that we are told by developers that two hectares is now too large and a waste of land. People do not have the time to look after such a large block and it is not efficient. What people now want we are told is 1 hectare; space for a tennis court, a swimming pool, a garden, maybe a pony? Suddenly rural New Zealand is being cut up into over sized sections to cater for lifestyle choices. So do people really want a lifestyle block or do they just want a bit of room to move like the old days and would an old

fashioned quarter acre section fit the bill? Perhaps this is why real estate agents say that the turnover in lifestyle blocks is larger than any other property type.

The second major change of recent times is the tendency for commercial pastoral properties to increase in size by amalgamating with neighbouring properties. The number of staff required for these properties is much lower than 50 years ago due to the capabilities of modern machinery. Sometimes, those staff who are employed choose to live in the nearest town and commute to work rather than live on the farm. They cite access to schools, facilities, wife/partner's work, sport etc as the reasons why. All these factors have led to the phenomenon of the redundant farmhouse. These houses, sold with a hectare of land help reduce the mortgage and repopulate rural areas. Added to this are the old family homesteads – large, romantic, cold, drafty houses which attract buyers like bees to a honey pot. Often subdivided with original gardens they become homestays or B & B's while further reducing the mortgage and allowing the vendor to build a modern, warm, family oriented house.

Coasts and Lake sides

These highly desirable locations for subdivision are often the most fragile and have the least supporting infrastructure. The desire of many to have a house by the sea has seen the value of coastal rural land soar way beyond its productive value. These properties then become highly rated compared with their inland counterparts which puts further pressure on the owner to subdivide. The problems for local government can be many. Coastal roads which traditionally serviced a handful of farms, struggle with increased weekend traffic. New residents soon start to agitate to have the road upgraded, the cost of which is way in excess of roading contributions from the subdivision. Locals resent the influx of visitors and complain about noise, dust, dogs and fire risk. The new residents who have made massive investments in land purchase and house construction complain about cow manure on the road, rural noise (stock, machinery), dust, dogs and smell. The houses built bear no resemblance to the kiwi batch of old and as such attract unwelcome attention from criminals. These coastal settlements are often some distance from the nearest town and police protection is limited or nil.

Arguments in favour of lifestyle blocks

Lifestyle blocks have re-populated much of rural New Zealand and aided the resurgence of rural towns as service centres.

They encourage intensive use of rural land for high value crops such as olives, grapes and flowers which adds diversity to a district and the environment.

They have been responsible for replacing planting on bare land as owners attempt to beautify their blocks, provide shelter for crops and improve the environment to attract bird life. This is in stark contrast to the open bare land approach still favoured by

some pastoral farmers (often due to historical use of the land and the cost of planting shelter belts on large paddocks).

Rarely does the land provide sufficient income to be self sufficient so owners often derive further income from other sources either by commuting to a nearby city or working from home. This income from outside the district further supports the local economy.

Small blocks can be farmed as part of a larger block, freeing up capital for the farmer and providing a place in the country for the owner while the land still remains productive.

They provide work for locals both as contractors like builders, electricians etc and as casual labour for horticulture.

Challenges facing Local Government

Balancing the kiwi premise of the 'right to do what you want with your own land' against the loss of traditional production associated with rural land.

Protecting our rural production for the future – you can't eat trees!

The loss of rural amenity – what exactly is rural amenity?

Managing the Resource Management Act and District Plans. This is becoming more complicated and costly for Councils. Central Government questions whether Councils are qualified enough to make RMA decisions on behalf of the communities they represent. Panel members must now be assessed and achieve 'the competencies required by the Making Good Decisions programme'. Purist planners urge us to throw away the rules and consider moving to 'effects based plans' where each application is judged solely on its merits (or lack of). The trouble with this is that it takes a strong panel to turn down a discretionary activity. Those that do are often accused of being anti development and for the paltry sum of \$55 the applicant or submitters can appeal the decision. A trip to the Environment Court costs a Council a minimum of fifty thousand dollars and even if the decision is upheld, costs awarded are lucky to cover one third of this. It's an expensive process, especially for small councils and not one that encourages tough decision making.

Managing the effects on the community when properties are used simply as weekenders. Who mans the volunteer fire brigade and ambulance service if many of the population are not permanent? How do you cope with large influxes of people in weekends, holidays and the associated pressure on infrastructure when people visit their weekenders? These 'visitors' are not part of your population according to the census and therefore not on Central Government's radar as your problem when it comes to dishing out subsidies. Nor are they part of the equation when considering policing and health budgets.

Managing urban expectations in rural environments. A place in the country is quiet, sweet smelling and idyllic right? Wrong! We have stinky silage, cow manure on the road, top dressing planes, sprays, frost fans, bird scarers, chain saws, logging trucks, shotguns, tractors and dust. We shoot ducks, rabbits, poison possums, crows and starlings, cut off lamb's tails, take calves from their mothers at three days old and send them to the works. We irrigate land in summer when townspeople are not allowed to water their garden. Reverse sensitivity and complaints about traditional rural practise is common.

Managing the effects on the environment. These are many and varied. They include visual effect of additional buildings, dust – especially on unsealed roads or new gravel driveways adjacent to boundaries, noise, stormwater runoff, landscaping and its effect on secondary flow paths, waste water disposal, infiltration into waterways, inappropriate use of waterways, pressure on aquifers from additional bores, population pressure on sensitive habitats and rubbish disposal.

What about the future. Will the spiralling cost of petrol see these remote rural subdivisions become mini ghost towns with derelict buildings? Will the cost of transport mean that production off small holdings becomes not only non-profit but actually a cost to the owner? Does the cost of transport right now mean we must protect productive land around our metropolitan areas rather than cut it up? After all the cities are the consumers so wouldn't it make sense to produce consumables close to the market that consumes?

Many of the matters raised above can be addressed through the RMA and appropriate conditions on consents. Others however need a shift in the basic philosophy of how we regard our rural land. Production, play area or problem? It all depends on your perspective.

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(The comments above are mine and not necessarily those of South Wairarapa District Council).