

Submission

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To: Waikato District Council
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Submission on: Representation Review 2021

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1. INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL COMMENTS

- 1.1 Federated Farmers thanks Waikato District Council (“WDC”) for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Reshape Waikato - Representation Review 2021.
- 1.2 We wish to speak to our submission at the Council hearing.
- 1.3 Federated Farmers is conscious that there may be significant ‘consultation fatigue’ out in the community following the Long-Term Plan consultation process and 18 months’ worth of significant central government proposals. At this time of the year, farmers are also worrying about feed supply, the weather, and are coping with round the clock calving and lambing – it is one of the busiest times in the farming calendar. This may have affected rural turn out at the Council ‘drop in’ sessions and in low response rates to the survey questions.
- 1.4 Our members do not want their busy silence to be misconstrued as disinterest in rural representation or worse still as ‘silent approval’. Federated Farmers represents hundreds of local farming ratepayers. We remind the Council of this so that our submission is given appropriate weight.
- 1.5 Federated Farmers appreciates that the Local Electoral Act 2001 (“LEA”) requires WDC to review representation arrangements every six years. The last review was carried out in 2018 in time for the local body elections in October 2019. The next review was scheduled for 2024. However, we understand that the Council’s decision to establish Maaori wards has bought forward the representation review to 2021.
- 1.6 Federated Farmers is very disappointed rural communities have not been identified as ‘communities of interest’ in their own right. The proposal identifies communities of interest, worthy of the extra engagement and resources provided by a community board, from a completely urban-centric perspective which is not appropriate or good enough for your rural ratepayers.
- 1.7 Much is made of the fact that this proposal has been developed based on initial and early feedback which was undertaken in 2020 and yet we note from a staff report dated 30 June 2021 that key findings from focus groups was that community boards remain popular as a form of local representation and that consideration should be given to establishing rural community boards, separate from neighbouring urban towns. Further, that the preferred number of councillors was between 14 and 16. Neither of these key findings are represented in the initial proposal, which is a frustration given that they would better meet the goals of the proposal which are stated as being that:
- It aligns with our communities of interest
 - It ensures that our communities of interest are effectively represented.
 - It largely reflects community views from our early engagement.
- 1.8 To summarise our position, Federated Farmers supports a ward system, wants to ensure ward boundaries accurately represent communities of interest and that rural representation is not lost in the reshuffle to establish Maaori wards. We strongly oppose the proposed changes to remove rural communities from community board

boundaries and the new Waerenga-Hukanui General Ward boundary which is far too big to accurately represent and reflect communities of interest. In our view the key findings from early consultation and what should be being considered have largely been ignored with population mesh blocks taking over as the key drivers for change.

2. FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

2.1 Do you support the Overall Draft Initial proposal?

Partial support is extended to the proposals:

- The ward system is supported; however the size and extent of some of the boundaries is not.
- Community Boards are supported; however the proposal to exclude rural communities is not.
- The number of Councillors could be increased to improve representation across communities of interest, or new Rural Community Boards established to help fill in the gaps.

2.2 Mayor and Councillors – do you agree with the proposal to have 13 councillors, comprising 11 general ward councillors and 2 Maaori ward councillors, together with a Mayor (elected ‘at large’)?

We understand that the decision to establishment Maaori wards has been made and is not part of this consultation process. Federated Farmers key matter of interest is to ensure rural ward representation is not diminished as a consequence of that decision.

To be clear, Federated Farmers does not support a reduction in rural ward councillors or WDC moving to an at large voting system.

2.3 Proposed ward structure – do you agree with the proposal regarding eight wards?

Whilst a ward system is supported in principle, some of the boundaries seem artificial or are too large (eg Waerenga-Hukanui General Ward) to be a true representation of communities of interest.

Many of those in fiscal and policy decision making roles in WDC will not have grown up on farms and some may never have set foot on one. Rural representation on Council is essential to provide rural perspectives, connections and knowledge. Further, a diverse skillset and knowledge base is essential to good governance. In our view, rural councillors bring different skills and insights to the table, which benefits the entire district.

Farmers are part of distinct rural “communities of interest” that may be characterised by, among other things: their isolation (both geographical and social), demanding jobs (i.e., physical, all weather, all terrain, long hours) and their business (animal husbandry, land intensive, high turnover / high debt).

From a representation perspective, these differences are vulnerabilities, which make access to local councillors fully cognisant of the realities of farming and rural issues

essential. In our view, rural councillors enable farmers to access and participate more effectively in local government.

A useful though frustrating example of the lack of understanding of farming businesses can be seen in the recent staff recommendations to submissions on the Long-Term Plan.

In discussing Federated Farmers request to set the UAGC to the fullest extent possible, staff made recommendations based on the impact on residential properties only. Reasoning that residential property owners cannot offset rates like commercial, business (including farming) and industrial property owners can. We want to advise Council staff that farming businesses are price takers; they do not get to offset rates or pass on any internal or external costs for that matter like other businesses can. It is accepted that a farming business can claim the GST portion on their rates back but there will be increasing opportunities and existing examples where residential properties can do the same, not least of all in this increasing 'working from home' environment.

The ward boundaries as proposed give very poor representation of communities of interest. Some points to note:

- Port Waikato has the inclusion of Aka Aka which has no community of interest with the south side of the Waikato River in the proposed Port Waikato Ward
- The western side of the Waikato River north of Lake Whangape has no community of interest with the rest of the proposed Waerenga -Hukanui Ward and it is likely that the northern part of the ward up to the Firth of the Thames has no community of interest with the southern part of the ward down by Tamahere.
- The Raglan Ward has significantly encroached into the Te Akau District and does not share a common community of interest.

In our view the proposed ward boundaries have been too heavily influenced by population mesh blocks. Whilst we understand the purpose of the +/- 10% threshold is to ensure each councillor represents roughly the same number of people in the district, there is discretion to breach that range should it be required to ensure communities of interest are fairly and effectively represented.

In our view several key changes could be made to better reflect communities of interest and natural geographical boundaries, for example including the northern portion of the Pokeno Ward into the Waerenga-Hukanui ward with the western side of the Waikato River retained in the Port Waikato ward and the Aka Aka portion of the Port Waikato ward retained in the Tuakau ward. The Port Waikato Ward could then naturally include Rangiriri and Glen Massey areas, with subsequent changes to the Raglan ward to incorporate Whatawhata, which to us seems to have much more in common with the wider Raglan area than the northern parts of the proposed Raglan ward does. Whilst it is accepted that the proposed Waerenga-Hukanui ward is predominantly rural, the geographical distance, topography, types of farming and places of interest, schools, churches, sports clubs and shopping centres etc are quite different. It is appreciated that this ward would have two councillors but those living within that large ward may

prefer to have it split in two to guarantee a councillor closer to home than could be the case under the proposal.

2.4 Community Boards- do you agree with this proposal regarding the community boards?

No.

Federated Farmers appreciates that when undertaking a Representation Review, s19J of the LEA requires WDC to consider whether community boards are appropriate to provide fair and effective representation. Federated Farmers has had particularly strong feedback from our members on this point.

The proposal to refocus community boards to provide support and resource to urban communities only has been met with real concern and anger. It has created a sense of division and inequity where there was none previously.

The consultation material does not provide any meaningful explanation as to why WDC considers it appropriate to enable and provide fair and effective representation to urban communities but not rural. It is difficult to follow the point being made about rural groups or how 'they' (note no information was provided about the groups) can or would be enabled to perform the statutory functions of community boards. Without having the same functions and powers there is no like for like, which makes it difficult to understand why this is considered a valid alternative and genuine equitable option for rural ratepayers to consider.

The same frustrations exist with WDC putting up a community committee option in the feedback survey, as an alternative to community boards for rural representation, without explaining the key differences between boards and committees. WDC is asking people to make important decisions without providing meaningful information and a clear understanding of the consequences. The actual like for like option would be for a new Rural Community Board to be established but no information was provided as to what the criteria would be, how to that could be established or what the funding implications would be.

There is serious concern that the proposal to remove rural communities from Community Board boundaries, along with the changed ward boundaries and reshuffle of Councillor numbers to accommodate the Maaori Wards, are going to compromise rural representation much more disproportionately and more directly than urban communities.

WDC advised on page 21 of the Statement of Proposal that they will meet with relevant rural communities during the submission period to discuss this proposal more broadly. We know of no specific consultation that has taken place which would meet that stated commitment. We also know that no public face to face meetings were held on either this point or the other proposals. If WDC doesn't take the matter seriously enough to go out to their people and meet face to face in a public forum that facilitates information sharing, discussion and percolating of ideas then it is unlikely that people will

appreciate the importance of a Representation Review or what is being proposed. Unfortunately, that results in low response numbers which doesn't help anyone.

We disagree with the resolution passed at the 7 July 2021 Council meeting that the proposed changes to the current representation arrangements will provide effective and accessible representation to rural communities of interest or that changes to the boards are minor and required to reflect growth in the respective communities and ensure effective representation of those communities.

In our view the only equitable options are to either retain the status quo or establish Rural Community Boards to sit alongside the Urban ones that are being proposed. The most obvious change is to amend the Onewhero-Tuakau board to separate it out into two, one being the Tuakau urban portion as proposed and the other the rural portion of Onewhero extended down and around Te Akau.

Federated Farmers thanks the Waikato District Council for considering our feedback on Reshape Waikato - Representation Review 2021.

ABOUT FEDERATED FARMERS

Federated Farmers is a not-for-profit primary sector policy and advocacy organisation that represents most farming businesses in New Zealand. Federated Farmers has a long and proud history of representing the interests of New Zealand's farmers.

The Federation aims to add value to its members' farming businesses. Our key strategic outcomes include the need for New Zealand to provide an economic and social environment within which:

- Our members may operate their business in a fair and flexible commercial environment.
- Our members' families and their staff have access to services essential to the needs of the rural community; and
- Our members adopt responsible management and environmental practices.

This submission is representative of member views and reflect the fact that local government rating and spending policies impact on our member's daily lives as farmers and members of local communities.

