Strategic Spatial Planning: The Whangarei District Growth Strategy

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Introduction

The Resource Management Act 1991 supposedly heralded a new era of market-led, performance-based environmental regulation in New Zealand. This form of ‘non-planning’, it was argued, would replace traditional land use planning which had in the past attempted to regulate the geography of economic development. Under the new ‘effects-based’ regime the spatial distribution of land uses would be largely determined by a deregulated market and planning would merely manage the environmental effects of those activities (externalities) largely on a site-by-site basis.

So went the theory (ideology). The reality is very different. Local authorities charged with the integrated management of land use activities, the orderly and efficient provision of infrastructure, and the control of cumulative long term environmental effects are finding that there remains a critical need for strategic (future-oriented) land use planning. In pursuit of the sustainable management of natural and physical resources, performance-based, site-specific environmental regulation has not (and it is argued, cannot) take the place of ‘pro-active’ strategic spatial planning. Increasingly, councils are looking outside of the Resource Management Act 1991 to undertake strategic spatial planning. A more holistic approach to long term strategic planning is available under the Local Government Act 2002. A number of councils in New Zealand have adopted such an approach to provide strategic direction to land development and infrastructure provision over the longer term.

The Local Government (Auckland Council) Act 2009 made strategic spatial planning mandatory for the new Auckland Council and outlined the purpose and contents of such a plan. The statutory purpose is wide-ranging, i.e. to contribute to… social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being through a comprehensive and effective long-term (20-30 years) strategy for [managing]… growth and development…by setting a strategic direction…that integrates social, economic, environmental, and cultural objectives. The spatial plan must identify the geographic location of development and integrate future land uses (location and type) with the provision of infrastructure (both hard and soft), whilst identifying environmental constraints, hazards, and natural and historic heritage that should be protected from development.

In the Whangarei district of Northland, the district council has recently produced a strategic spatial planning document – the Whangarei District Growth Strategy: Sustainable Futures 30/50 – in response to significant growth over the period 2001 - 2008. This paper examines the Growth Strategy and shows how, contrary to the ideologically narrowed view of ‘effects-based’ planning, the strategic vision, along with the concrete proposals contained in the Strategy, are essential to ensure the integrated management of land use activities, the orderly and efficient provision of infrastructure, and the control of long term cumulative environmental effects. The provisions in the Growth Strategy can be used to inform the statutory planning process under the Resource Management Act 1991 and the Local Government Act 2002. In this way, the ‘visions’ articulated in the Growth Strategy can be translated into ‘actions’ through the district plan, long term council community plan, and annual plans. This approach, it is concluded, is better able to sustainably manage the district’s natural and physical resources, and contribute to the sustainable development of the district.

Growth Pressures

The Whangarei district experienced significant growth over the period 2001 to 2008. Between 2001 and 2006 the population of the district increased from around 68,000 to 74,400 an increase of 9.35% or almost 2% per annum. The population increased to around 79,000 by 2009. Rural and coastal areas experienced higher growth than urban areas. Over the past 15 years around 40% of population growth occurred in urban Whangarei or around the urban fringes whilst around 60% occurred in rural and coastal areas. Rates of population growth were highest along the coast, and in rural areas. The average annual growth rate for the rural area was 3% whilst along the coast it averaged 2%. This compared with an average annual growth rate of around 0.5% per annum in urban Whangarei.
This has resulted in widespread development throughout the district, including ribbon development along the coast and along transport corridors, sporadic development on the urban fringes, and scattered rural residential development throughout the rural and coastal areas. The widely dispersed nature of this development has created a number of challenges for the district. First, the timely and cost effective provision of infrastructure is difficult if the future location of development is unknown or fragmented. Infrastructure provision under this scenario tends to be reactive rather than proactive. Infrastructure, such as water provision, wastewater and stormwater disposal, solid waste disposal, roading, parks and reserves all require long lead in times to plan and supply services in a cost effective and timely manner.

Managing the cumulative effects of development on the biophysical environment increases in complexity if development is widely dispersed and effects have to be managed on a case by case basis. The danger of ‘death by a thousand cuts’ is inherent to this approach. There is mounting evidence in the district of adverse cumulative effects on landscape, natural character of the coast, biodiversity, water quality, and amenity values. Avoiding adverse effects of development on historic and cultural heritage, including sites of significance to Maori and archaeological sites, is difficult when development is widely dispersed and lightly regulated. Ribbon development along the coast and transport corridors is resulting in continuing detrimental effects on historic and cultural heritage, particularly sites of significance to Maori and the district’s historic stone walls.

The fragmentation and consequent reduction in the productive potential of agricultural land is an on-going challenge to the district. Protecting productive farm land from urban spread and rural residential development, particularly on the high class versatile volcanic soils close to Whangarei City is extremely difficult given the widespread subdivision of this valuable land resource over recent times. Such scattered development also reduces productivity through reverse sensitivity issues arising when residential development occurs in a productive farming landscape. Avoiding natural hazards and future risks from climate change is also difficult under a widely dispersed settlement pattern. This type of development pattern increases risks from natural hazards and exacerbates responses to, and costs of, hazard events.

Although growth in the district is slowing in line with global and national trends, future growth is projected to continue and in some parts of the district has the potential to be substantial, particularly in the Marsden Point/Ruakaka area and along the coast. The population of the Whangarei District is projected to increase from 74,430 in 2006 to around 110,000 in 2041 and to around 130,000 in 2061. This represents an average annual increase of 1.35% or 1,000 additional people per annum, and a total increase in population of around 55,000. This equates to an average annual increase in occupied dwellings of 1.42%, or 400 additional dwellings per annum. Moreover, based on recent growth rates, there is likely to be around 100 additional holiday homes per annum, mostly in coastal areas.

Managing Growth

To manage projected growth sustainably, the Whangarei District Council committed to formulating a long term sub-regional growth strategy. This project, entitled Sustainable Futures 30/50, sought to identify economic drivers of development, assess future growth potential, determine existing and potential land use patterns, and assess and plan for infrastructural requirements for the district over a 30/50 year time frame. Environmental, social and cultural constraints on, and consequences of, anticipated development were identified and assessed. Early in the process Council identified the need to consolidate growth, identify areas for infill, create transition from urban to rural, and provide a choice of living styles and locations. This research and analysis enabled a long term, integrated, strategic planning programme to be developed, based upon sustainability principles, which will assist the sustainable development of the district over the next 50 years.

The 30 to 50 year time frame was chosen deliberately to provide a framework within which to manage future growth in the district. Firstly, the 50 year time frame provides for the development of a long term vision for the district towards which Council can orientate its planning and resource management functions. The 50 year time frame enables Council to respond to, and plan for, longer term natural cycles such as climate change, biological change (forestry and fisheries), changes to hydrology, changing land use patterns, and so on. The 30 year time frame enables Council to plan for the timely and efficient provision of infrastructure (both hard and soft). Major infrastructural developments
require long term strategic planning, and a 30 year planning horizon ties in with land transport strategies and plans formulated under the Land Transport Management Act 2003.

The Whangarei Growth Strategy, based upon these longer term planning horizons, provides the overarching framework for a suite of planning documents required under those statutes prescribing the functions of local government. For example, beneath the Growth Strategy (30/50 years) and the Regional Land Transport Strategy (30 years) sit the Coastal Management Strategy, Urban Growth Strategy, Urban Form and Development Report, Open Space Strategy, Urban Design Strategy, 20/20 Plus Central City Development Plan, and a range of structure plans produced for the coast and urban fringe. These all adopt a 20+ year planning horizon. Below these documents sit the Long Term Plan formulated under the Local Government Act 2002 and the Whangarei District Plan formulated under the Resource Management Act 1991 both of which adopt a 10 year planning cycle.

The Growth Strategy was structured using a sustainable development approach. It integrates the four sustainability criteria contained within this concept – sustainable economy, sustainable environment, sustainable society and sustainable culture. This is in recognition that if development is to be beneficial to the district over the long term it must be founded upon enduring economic growth that is cognisant of its natural, social and cultural environment. In other words, economic growth must not be at the expense of the natural environment, it must enhance social well being, and it must recognise and respect cultural diversity, in particular the cultural traditions and aspirations of tangata whenua. Adopting a sustainable development approach also meets the requirements of the Local Government Act 2002 which specifically prescribes such an approach and requires councils to orientate their planning to improving four well beings: economic, environmental, social and cultural.

The four well beings were first examined on a district-wide basis under the following groupings: sustainable economy; sustainable environment; sustainable society; sustainable culture; and sustainable infrastructure. Under sustainable economy, the economic profile of the district, drivers of growth, development strategies, minerals and aggregates, and energy resources were examined. Under sustainable environment, land use, natural hazards, biodiversity, landscape/natural character, air and water quality, contaminated land, climate change and ecosystem services were analysed. Under sustainable society, demographic trends, socio-economic indicators, health, education and public safety, sense of place, local character and urban design were examined. Sustainable culture included an analysis of ethnic diversity, historic and cultural heritage, and arts, culture and civic amenities. Sustainable infrastructure looked at land transport, air and sea transport, telecommunications, along with local infrastructure and services.

Thirty background reports were produced and provided most of the factual information for developing the strategy. Part B of the Strategy – Sustainable District – contains a synopsis of the district-wide analysis and identifies district-wide issues that need to be addressed in the implementation phase.

**Alternative Futures**

To stimulate debate as to the preferred future development path for the district over the next 50 years, three alternative futures for the district were developed at a broad conceptual level. Future One represented a lightly regulated, market led approach to development and, in general, reflected land development in the district over the past 10-20 years. It was presented as a continuation of this lightly regulated, market driven approach to land development and could be seen as a baseline against which to evaluate the other two options, as well as an alternative development path in its own right.

Future Three represented a managed, consolidated development path based upon a structured five tier settlement pattern. This hierarchical arrangement was as follows: Whangarei City as the primary district and regional urban centre with a strong, protected and enduring CBD; a satellite town at Marsden Point/Ruakaka which complements (but does not compete with) Whangarei City; five urban villages within greater Whangarei; one rural (Hikurangi) and two coastal growth nodes at Parua Bay and Waipu; and two rural villages along with eight coastal villages located along the coastline from Waipu Cove in the south to Oakura in the north.

Future Two was an intermediate position between Futures One and Three. It represented a moderately controlled, less consolidated development path based upon a three tier settlement pattern. These tiers consisted of: twin cities at Whangarei and Marsden Point/Ruakaka competing
with each other for higher level service provision; urban and coastal settlements with some associated urban sprawl and ribbon development; and rural development largely at village level with some sporadic development in the rural area.

Following feedback from the community, stakeholders and tangata whenua, the three alternative futures were assessed using a range of criteria within a sustainable development framework, including sustainable economy and infrastructure, sustainable environment, sustainable society and sustainable culture. Constraints upon, and consequences of, each scenario were analysed and reported back to the community for further comment. Finally, a preferred option – Future Three – was chosen and used to provide a broad conceptual development path around which further detailed analysis could be undertaken.

**Sustainable Future 30/50**

The preferred future development path for the district – Sustainable Future 30/50 - was then examined in greater detail. This analysis was structured once again around the four sustainability criteria or well beings, but at a nodal (or individual settlement) level. Each node was examined to determine its past and future growth rates, the economic factors that influence those growth rates, existing and future infrastructure needs, environmental constraints and opportunities, and the social and cultural implications of growth in the node.

Each nodal analysis included an examination of existing land availability for various uses including residential, rural/residential, commercial and industrial uses. Future land requirements for residential and business uses were identified based upon projected growth rates for each node. Past and future population growth was analysed for each node along with growth in household numbers and household projections. Business floor area was analysed for each node along with future projections. Business land area was examined and future projections included. Employment growth was analysed and projections of future employment calculated. Based on the above information, existing land capacity for both residential and business use was determined and, where and when existing capacity was exhausted, projections made for future land requirements.

The economic conditions and projections for the future that determine nodal growth and hence land requirements were analysed for each node. A business profile was developed which included number of businesses, types of businesses, number of employees, types of employment, etc. An analysis of existing infrastructure was included along with projected infrastructure needs and indicative costings over the next 30/50 years. This included water provision, wastewater disposal, stormwater, transportation, parks and reserves. The environment of each node was examined to determine existing land use, water resources, natural hazard constraints, existing biodiversity, landscape and natural character values, ecosystem services and the implications of future climate change. The social and cultural infrastructure of each node was examined to determine present circumstances and future needs. This included health, education and safety, sense of place and urban design, arts, culture and civic amenities, historic and cultural heritage and tangata whenua interests.

All of the above analyses contributed to a comprehensive examination of the preferred future development path for the district over the next 30/50 years, and a spatial plan of the future development path was derived from this analysis. In brief, analysis showed that, despite significant development across the whole district, growth in the different nodes has been variable. This variable growth pattern has, in turn, created different pressures that will need to be accommodated in the future management of development. There has been limited residential development around some of the urban nodes (such as Tikipunga, Otaika and Onerahi) despite available residential zoned land. In other nodes, there is a limited amount of residential land zoned despite high recent growth rates, e.g. Maungatapere, Maungakaramea and Pataua. In general, there is sufficient capacity of zoned residential land in most nodes to accommodate demand over the medium to longer term.

There has been a high level of recent land subdivision in some locations that has exceeded actual demand, mainly around coastal settlements such as Tutukaka, Matapouri, parts of the Whangarei Heads area and at Marsden Point/Ruakaka. This is especially evident in the numbers of existing vacant rural/residential lots in many coastal locations. Whilst there will be continued demand for this type of land use over time, there may be little need to facilitate further subdivision of rural/residential land in these areas over the medium term.
Apart from general land requirements, it is clear that some locations need a better ‘fit’ between community expectations and patterns of development that enhance local ‘sense of place’. The nodal analysis indicated that more detailed planning is required around some coastal and rural nodes. The high projected populations (especially when compared with their present population) of Parua Bay, Waipu, Hikurangi and the rural villages of Maungakaramea and Maungatapere will necessitate careful planning to maintain and enhance existing ‘sense of place’. Likewise, some coastal settlements require detailed planning to ensure their natural attributes are not adversely affected by development.

In many nodes there are constraints which impact on the scale and location of future development. Natural hazard constraints are common in most nodes, especially in many coastal settlements and in some of the urban nodes. In some areas, particularly around Maunu, Maungatapere, Maungakaramea, Three Mile Bush Road and Glenbervie, there are constraints imposed by the presence of high class versatile soils. Another important constraint on development can be infrastructure availability. Some nodes have high current capacity for development in the short to medium term, whereas others do not.

Whangarei City is a particularly complex place to accommodate future growth. Future development in this node will require intensification strategies, mixed use development, changes in transport infrastructure, and innovative planning methods to accommodate population growth and enhance urban amenity. Several projects are already underway, e.g. CBD/Town Basin reviews, the second harbour crossing, roading upgrades, intensification and mixed use initiatives, etc. Further work programmes will be required that build upon these earlier projects.

Implementation and Conclusions

Sustainable Futures 30/50 represents a partnership between the Whangarei District Council and the community. Community input was seen as essential to the formulation of the Growth Strategy. Over the two year timeframe of the project various methods were used to engage with the public on an ongoing basis. A Sustainable Futures brochure was produced outlining the main points of the project and was widely distributed across the district, along with feedback forms for use by the public. A Sustainable Futures website was set up which contained an outline of the project, background research reports as they were completed, and information about public consultation and engagement with tangata whenua. Online feedback forms were available. An extensive two year public engagement programme was designed around two major public consultation exercises.

Developing a partnership with tangata whenua and widespread engagement with iwi and hapu were seen as essential to the success of Sustainable Futures 30/50. This relationship was initiated and progressed in a variety of ways. These included the recognition of tangata whenua in the overall governance arrangement of the project, interaction with the Maori Liaison Committee of Council, ongoing involvement of Council’s Maori Liaison Officers, working with various Maori Trusts of Te Taitokerau and their technical staff, and information and consultation meetings with iwi and hapu throughout the district. A report providing direct iwi and hapu input to the Growth Strategy was also commissioned and its findings incorporated into the Strategy.

The effectiveness of the Growth Strategy relies upon a rigorous and consistent implementation process. The Growth Strategy provides an overview of implementation methods and actions along with monitoring requirements and review procedures. This overview will act as a framework for the development of a full Growth Strategy Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan will detail a programme of activities required to implement the Growth Strategy. A variety of tools, statutory and non-statutory, are available to assist implementation. Some tools and documents already exist, but may require amendment, whereas others may represent new initiatives.

The Implementation Plan will also outline how the Growth Strategy will be monitored and reviewed over time. A suite of indicators need to be developed and monitored at regular intervals to measure outcomes and progress over time. Periodic reviews will assess the effectiveness of the Growth Strategy in achieving its purpose and objectives, and whether parts of the Strategy need to be amended to address changing circumstances or as new information comes to hand. Figure 1 provides a strategic overview of this on-going process and illustrates how the Growth Strategy and its various
components fit together to provide a long term strategic planning framework for the district over the next 50 years.

In conclusion, significant growth over the period 2001 to 2008, together with a lightly regulated, ‘effects based’, market driven approach to land development in the Whangarei district, resulted in widespread development throughout the district, including ribbon development along the coast and along transport corridors, sporadic development on the urban fringes, and scattered rural residential development throughout the rural and coastal areas. The widely dispersed nature of this development created a number of challenges for the district, including the timely and cost effective provision of infrastructure, the effective management of long term cumulative effects of development on the environment (and the community), and the retention of farmland (including high class versatile soils) for productive use. Performance-based, site-specific environmental regulation is inherently unable to address these challenges. Strategic (future-oriented) spatial planning which integrates land use and infrastructure planning (amongst other things) offers more realistic solutions.

The strategic vision, along with the analysis contained in the Whangarei Growth Strategy, are able to assist integrated management of land use activities, orderly and efficient provision of infrastructure, and control of long term cumulative environmental effects in the district. The Whangarei District Growth Strategy: Sustainable Futures 30/50 represents an innovative approach to managing future growth through long term strategic spatial planning. Whilst ensuring integration of future land use with infrastructure provision, it addresses all four well beings – economic, environmental, social and cultural - in a comprehensive and holistic manner so as to better enable the sustainable development of the district over the next 50 years. The Whangarei District Growth Strategy provides a useful example of comprehensive strategic planning to other councils that may wish to consider such an approach to managing growth. This is particularly cogent, given the current discussions by Government (Building Competitive Cities) over extending the legislative mandate for strategic spatial planning to other areas of New Zealand.

Figure 1: Strategic Overview

The Whangarei Growth Strategy: Sustainable Futures 30/50, along with the 30 background reports, can be accessed on the Whangarei District Council website: www.wdc.govt.nz