

# Building sustainable settlements with communities in mind: A review of approaches to involving communities in growth management planning

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to identify best practice principles and methods for community engagement in strategic growth management planning. Community engagement as part of project development has received a great deal of attention in the research literature, and there is a significant body of theory that addresses best practice principles and methods for involving communities as part of project development. However, it is generally acknowledged that involving communities at the plan-level, particularly at the level of strategic planning is much more difficult. This paper reports on research which examined community engagement in growth management planning in two case studies from New Zealand. The paper discusses the community engagement processes used in these case studies and analyses these processes against a set of process and outcome criteria. It also identifies key 'lessons learnt' that emerge from the cases.

**KEYWORDS:** Community engagement, strategic growth management

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of local and regional authorities in New Zealand have developed growth management or urban development strategies over the last ten years. This is despite the lack of a legislative requirement or even mandate to do so outside of New Zealand's largest metropolitan area - Auckland. One of the challenges faced by planners not only in New Zealand, but internationally, in the development of these strategies has been the question of how to involve communities in the process. In the case of project development, a number of interested and affected parties can usually be easily identified and engaged on the potential impacts of a project. However, community engagement<sup>1</sup> (CE) in strategic plan development is

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of terms used to describe the process of involving community or stakeholders in project or

much more difficult, as these strategies potentially impact the entire community but the impact is spread and the effort required to engage with what is a complex and difficult subject is high. As a result, it is often more difficult to (1) get people interested in participating and, therefore, to get a wide range of stakeholders to participate; and (2) to provide for meaningful opportunities to influence the strategy development. The purpose of this paper is to identify best practice principles and methods for community engagement in strategic growth management planning by examining the practice in two very different case studies from New Zealand.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a great deal of literature that has discussed community engagement. The following section focuses on two important aspects of this literature of relevance to this research:

1. A brief overview of the arguments for community engagement
2. Challenges that have been identified with community engagement, particularly in relation to the CE methods used for strategic planning

Rydin and Pennington (2000, p.154) note:

*Calls for great public participation in environmental planning are found everywhere, from policy documentation at the central and local levels to academic literature, and from the publications of environmental groups to the pronouncements of the media.*

Rydin and Pennington (2000) classify the rationalisations for greater CE into two main camps. The first argues for the democratic right to be involved where emphasis is placed on enabling access to the policy process. Consequently, CE is conceived of as a right and not just a means to an end. The second argues that CE is a means to improve the effectiveness of policies and policy delivery, for example, the public provides not only information about their preferences but also important detailed local knowledge. They argue that this can avoid poorly designed policies as well as more legitimate policies with broader public support and, therefore, subject to fewer conflicts. Healey (1996) also advocates a shift from the “paternalism of traditional representative notions, to more participatory forms based on inclusionary argumentation” (p. 219). She argues this will result in greater equity in decision making as “diverse issues and diverse ways of raising issues can be given attention” (p. 219). Decision making in this way opens the potential for ‘better arguments’ to win over ‘powerful voices’ resulting in improved social outcomes.

In addition to the theoretical arguments for participation, there is also some empirical evidence for its benefits. For example, Burby (2003) who studied 60 plan-making processes in Florida and Washington, found that the greater the stakeholder involvement the stronger the plans were and the more likely they were to be implemented.

However, despite the strong arguments for community engagement in theoretical and empirical literature, in reality, there are a number of challenges to implementing effective consultation processes, these can be summarised as:

1. Low levels of public interest and involvement can lead to ‘participation capture’.
2. Participation is just as likely to lead to increased conflict as it is to reduce it.
3. Participation does not necessarily improve the quality of plans or planning outcomes.

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plan development processes including public consultation, public participation, public involvement and, most recently, community engagement. For the purpose of this report we use the term community engagement (CE) to refer to this process.

The first challenge of community engagement, particularly for plan/strategy development processes, is a low level of public interest and involvement. This led to CE processes getting captured by powerful and vocal minorities. Rydin and Pennington (2000, p.159) provide an explanation for this phenomenon using public choice theory. According to this theory, low levels of participation can be explained by considering the balance between: (1) the costs of participation versus the direct benefits of participation and/or the costs of non-participation, (2) the expected likelihood of participation influencing the policy outcome, (3) the expected distribution of costs and benefits associated with the policy outcome, and (4) the level of knowledge of the policy issue and policy process. Thus, in many instances where the policy under consideration potentially affects a large section of the population (as for growth management planning), there is a 'collective action problem' where the costs of participation may be high but the potential benefits are widely dispersed; and there is little potential for non-participation to be sanctioned. They also raise significant concerns about the potential for knowledgeable specialised interest groups to capture participation processes in order to gain benefits for themselves while moving the costs of policy onto other members of the "rationally ignorant" public that may in turn "perpetuate inefficient and environmentally poor policy practice" (Rydin and Pennington 2000, p.158).

The problem of low levels of participation can be particularly problematic in the case of strategic and regional planning. Seeling and Seeling (1997, p.20) concluded based on the evaluation of the relative low levels of participation in Vancouver's City Plan that "as the geographic scale of the planning exercise broadens, interest inevitably wanes". Whereas Hibbard and Lurie (2000, p.192) found in a case study of growth planning in Jackson/Teton County Wyoming that those with more resources were able to shape the discussion of issues "by retaining professional representation and using well-researched and presented data, graphics, and reports". Likewise, Cuthill (2004, p.441) who examined participation in a process of community visioning on the Gold Coast in Australia noted that "the educated, articulate and wealthy are generally better able to participate in traditional government 'consultation' processes". This is exacerbated by that fact that "the realities of many people's lifestyles mean, that for a variety of reasons, they are either not willing or able to take up opportunities ... to be involved in local governance processes".

The second challenge that has been laid against CE is that participation is just, if not more, likely to result in increased conflict as it is in consensus, and this can slow down the planning process, and weaken planning outcomes (Hibbard and Lurie, 2000). For example, Brody (2003) notes that:

*High levels of participation may increase conflict by having disputing parties at the negotiating table, frustrate planners by slowing down the decision-making process, and most importantly dilute the strength of the final agreement by having to balance competing interests*

A third challenge for effective public participation is that planners and decision-makers tend to ignore public input and do a poor job of incorporating citizen concerns into plans (Cuthill, 2004). For example, McCann (2001) in his evaluation of the visioning process used in Lexington, Kentucky found the issues of who controls the organisational aspects and the willingness of political leaders to listen are critical to the outcomes of the process.

Finally a number of challenges to CE have raised in relation to the use of different methods for community engagement.

Community engagement in plan and strategy development tends to range from ‘traditional approaches’, which include publication and consultation of discussion or options documents, supported by public meetings, followed by formal submissions on draft plans; to more active and creative ‘design-oriented’ methods, such as design workshops (e.g. charrettes or Enquiry by Design<sup>2</sup>). Another common method for CE is ‘visioning’, a technique which gained popularity in the 1990s in the US, which has been lauded by some and heavily criticised by others. Visioning involves active participation by the public in creating a ‘vision for the future’ of the community that is used as a reference point for the development of specific policies and objectives.

As stated earlier, a number of authors have questioned whether CE actually improves planning outcomes. Often these critiques have been laid in relation to specific community engagement techniques. Visioning has probably been one of the most criticised techniques with some research finding that many visioning processes have failed to result in concrete planning outcomes as part of strategic planning processes. For example, Shipley (2002) found there is anecdotal evidence that visioning has worked well at engaging a broader range of participants; however, vision statements are generally vague, providing ineffective “beacons” to move towards. Furthermore, several of the respondents in his study indicated that their vision statements had little or only a moderate impact on decision-making. A similar finding is provided by McCann (2001) in his evaluation of the visioning process used in Lexington, Kentucky. He found that visioning can easily devolve into expensive wish list for the future and found that in the case of Lexington, the process failed to achieve any solid outcomes. Likewise, Helling (1998) who evaluated Atlanta’s 2020 visioning project also found that this project resulted in few tangible outcomes or actions. She states:

*Phases I and II of the Atlanta metropolitan region's collaborative VISION 2020 were very effective in promoting interpersonal interaction on the topics it identified as important, but yielded few clearly significant, immediate results from its list of action initiatives, produced no plan capable of providing "a roadmap to the vision," and required the commitment of \$4.4 million in resources (p. 14)<sup>3</sup>*

Helling (1998) concludes that this was due to: setting process rather than outcome objectives; requiring consensus without having a clear mandate, incentive, or pressing problem to foster participation and spur compromise and change; and de-emphasizing the importance of substantive planning expertise and information without having an alternative standard of accuracy or source of public credibility.

Overall, a review of the literature indicates that CE as part of the development of strategic policies and plans is fraught with difficulties. What emerges is not a question of whether the public should or should not participate, but how that participation should be managed, including the need to identify which participation tools and techniques are likely to be most successful to (1) encourage public involvement, (2) help the community understand the complex issues and options involved in growth management planning; (3) elicit information that can be translated into achievable and sustainable planning outcomes through the development of strategic plans. Unfortunately, while there is a range of information available which describes and sometimes promotes different participation methods and tools, there has been very little objective and critical reflection on the effectiveness of these different tools in engaging the community or in improving planning outcomes. This research attempts to add to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.princes-foundation.org>

<sup>3</sup> Page number provided for HTML version of the paper.

this body of knowledge by investigating two cases of community engagement in the development growth management strategies in New Zealand.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research looked at the community engagement process and outcomes from two recent case studies of growth management planning in New Zealand (See Figure 4.1 for a location of the study areas):

- A Growth Management Strategy for the Queenstown Lakes District, April 2007 – produced by the Queenstown Lakes District Council (Queenstown)
- Whangarei Urban Growth Strategy, October 2003 – produced by the Whangarei District Council (Whangarei).

Both of the case studies were of Urban Development Strategies<sup>4</sup> (UDS) that had been completed but where the implementation of the strategy was still in progress. This allowed us to analyse both the process and outcomes of the strategy development and its implementation. The methodology for this research included interviews with council staff and community stakeholders<sup>5</sup> and a review of media reports and any documentation associated with the CE exercise. This review focused on a number of process and outcome criteria and themes that reflected the findings from the research literature. These criteria were not used to “evaluate” the case studies, but rather as a guide to direct the study to issues that had previously been identified as important for CE in strategic planning. However, despite the use of these criteria, the study was largely exploratory in nature, and focused on identifying key themes which emerged from the case studies.

#### Process criteria

1. CE strategy had clear goals and the CE process was clearly tied to those goals.
2. Full range of interests contributed to UDS.
3. Key stakeholders had real and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the UDS.
4. General community had real and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the UDS.
5. Community involved at the most appropriate stages in the development of the UDS.

#### Planning outcomes criteria

1. UDS addressed all the important and relevant issues for growth in the City.
2. UDS was improved due to contribution of information from the community.

#### Social outcomes criteria

The CE process resulted in:

1. broad social support for the outcomes in the UDS
2. participants having a greater understanding of key issues relating to growth and sustainability.
3. improved understanding amongst stakeholders of the rationale for different planning solutions.
4. improved understanding amongst stakeholders regarding the potential benefits of different planning solutions.

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of different names given to strategies that are used plan for urban growth/development, in this research the terms Urban Development Strategies (UDS) is used to capture all of these.

<sup>5</sup> For the Whangarei case study, we were unable to make contact with any community members who participated. This was due, in part, to the small number of individual (as opposed to institutions or businesses) that were recorded as participants through the feedback processes.

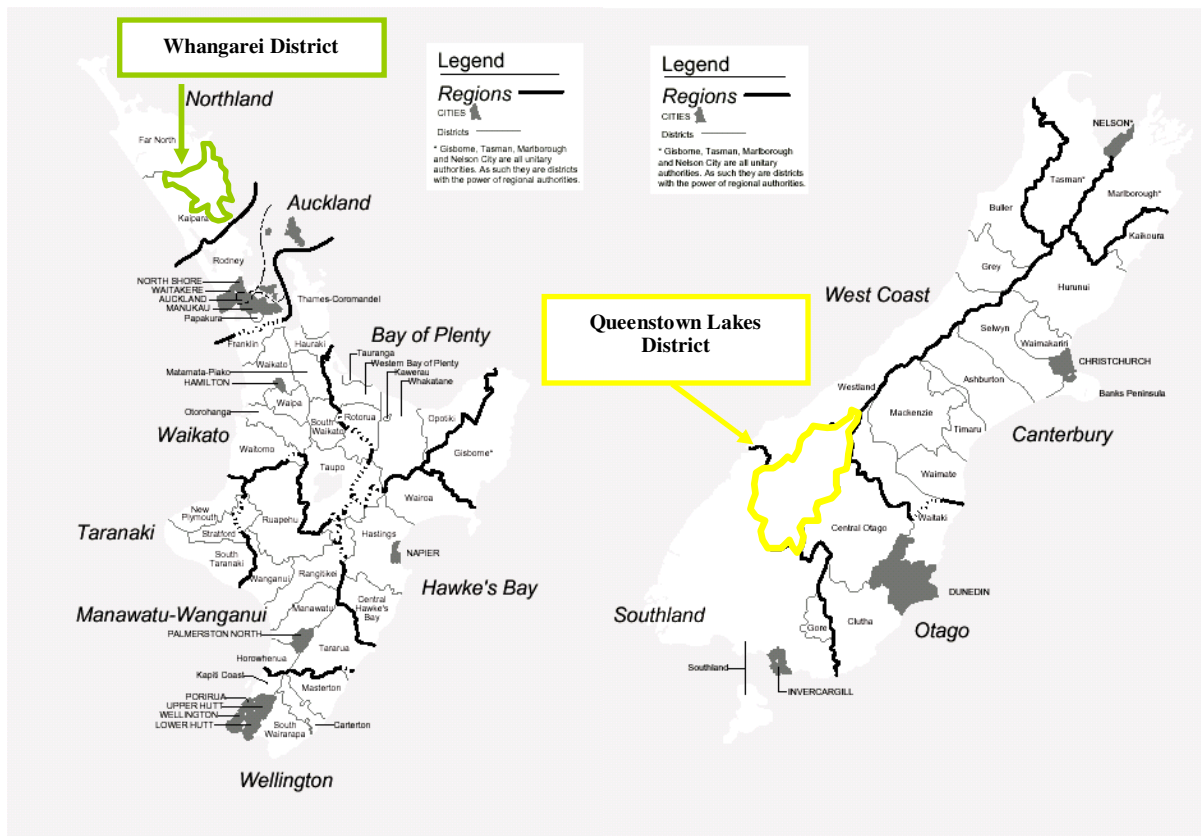


Figure 3.1: Local Authority Boundaries for the North Island (left) & South Island (Right)

## 4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE QUEENSTOWN LAKES DISTRICT COUNCIL GROWTH MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

### 4.1. Background

Historically, Queenstown and Wanaka were farming communities, however, the district's natural features including its mountains and lakes provide numerous opportunities for recreation (see figures 4.1 and 4.2) and, consequently, a local and international tourism industry established itself and thrived in the district.



Figure 4.1: Queenstown



Figure 4.2: Wanaka

A growing number of people moved to the district both for 'lifestyle' reasons and to access the opportunities that the growing tourism industry provided. This in turn drove growth in other industries in the district. Wanaka and Queenstown also became popular places to retire.

Today, both settlements continue to experience significant growth pressures; however, these pressures are more noticeable in Queenstown because there is limited land available for future growth due to the area's topography.

Prior to 2001, the rapid pace of development in Wanaka and Queenstown, coupled with a lack of strategic planning by the Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC), caused growing concern amongst the communities of the district regarding the shape of their future. There were strong calls from the community to be more involved in decisions about the future of the district and as a result in 2001, a new Council was elected on the basis of a promise for improved community involvement strategic planning for the district.

The QLDC's Growth Management Strategy (GMS) was developed over five years from 2002-2007 in three stages. The first stage was collaborative in nature. Community planning workshops incorporating a 'design charrette' were chosen as the primary tool to engage the community and over 300 people attended the Wanaka and Queenstown workshops. However, one of the key outcomes from the workshops was the need to understand growth better and consequently, the QLDC commissioned a Growth Options Study for Queenstown and Wanaka. As part of this study, three basic growth scenarios were developed (1) council does not intervene at all in the market, (2) council takes steps to manage growth by encouraging it in certain directions, and (3) council places actual limits/controls on growth. These scenarios were taken to the community at the second stage of the process the Growth Options 2020 workshops, with Council's preferred choice of scenario two. The purpose was to get 'buy-in' to a certain approach to growth management. Attendance decreased at these workshops, although those who did participate were described by one council employee as the "core group" "who contributed well". Finally, the Growth Management Strategy was drafted largely in-house using information gathered from the community planning workshops, the Growth Options 2020 workshops, and the Council Community Plan. The public was able to submit on the final draft of the GMS and attend an open day. One person turned up to the open day in Queenstown and no-one turned up in Wanaka.

#### **4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the QLDC's approach**

The overall success of the QLDC's approach to CE in the development of their GMS varied significantly across the three different stages both in terms of who was engaged and the outcomes achieved. The first stage of the process, using the community planning workshops, was clearly the most successful part of the CE strategy, engaging a wide range of stakeholders in a meaningful process. The success of this stage was attributed, in the first instance, to the principle of 'arm's length governance' that the council used and to the way in which the design charrettes were structured such that expert consultants, stakeholders and community members participated as equals in the process. Two years later the second stage of the process (Growth Options 2020) was advertised, however, the community by this time were disillusioned with the whole process, firstly, because of the time lag between the first and second stages of the process and, secondly, because little assurance was given from the council that something was being done to control growth. Consequently, the second stage was ambiguously received by the community. The third stage, which involved formal consultation on the Growth Management Strategy, elicited virtually no response from the community.

#### 4.2.1. Stage One: Community Planning Workshops

Three main factors contributed to the success of the community planning workshops. The first factor was based on the historical context of planning in the district. The second was a strategic position taken by the council to remove themselves from organising and running the process. The third was the way the workshops were run where all participants were treated as equals.

The first key factor which was seen to contribute to the success of the workshops was the context for engagement. Prior to 2001, the Council had effectively failed to plan for the district and, consequently, a number of significant land use changes were occurring in Queenstown and Wanaka over which locals felt they had little control. Additionally, the previous Council refused to communicate with the public and the combination of these factors generated a significant level of distrust between the Council and the community. According to a former planner for the QLDC:

*I think it was there and pent up from the previous Council who had been in for two terms and they had not communicated with the public at all and there was a media ban... we did not speak to media on behalf of Council or mention anything about Council. There was no communication with the community.*

At the first hint that the community would be let back into the process of deciding about the future of the district, community members got together and formed interest groups and organised meetings through local community groups to inform themselves. Consequently, the community was ready to be engaged in a process of this nature.

The second factor that was seen to contribute to the success of the workshops was the council organising the workshops using the principle of 'arms length governance'. This strategy was used so the council would be perceived as only one stakeholder in the process amongst many. To achieve this, steering committees were appointed in Wanaka and Queenstown to spread the word about the workshops. Members of the Steering Committee were drawn from the Council and from diverse sectors of the community. The steering committee was seen, therefore, as an impartial facilitator of the process rather than a vested interest in it.

Furthermore, out of town professional community engagement experts were commissioned to run the workshops in order to guard against community concerns that the council might have a vested interest in a particular outcome. The use of professionals also meant that workshop participants felt that the powerful interest groups and developers in the district could not capture and drive the workshops in a particular direction. Out of town experts in fields such as roading and infrastructure were also invited to present their perspectives on growth in the district, which was again seen as useful for providing a neutral point of view. According to the Mayor:

*It was really interesting for the community to be able to see how a roading engineer who had never worked on any project in this District saw the issues having been here for three days. It's a really healthy thing to do. The other thing which I didn't expect at the time but a couple of years later I had feedback that the people attending these workshops actually felt valued by the existence of these external people. You know that it wasn't just the ordinary old council roading engineer that they'd been complaining to about pot holes for 10 years but he knew about roading.*

*The Council had gone out and got highly qualified external people and put them into the mix and a lot of people felt valued by that.*

The third factor that was seen to contribute to the success of this stage of the process was the way the workshops were structured and run. The workshops tried to promote an “ethic of egalitarianism” where all groups and individuals stood on an equal footing. Community members and groups were given the same opportunities to present their views to the workshop audience as the development corporations; government agencies; council; and the out of town expert consultants. These different groups also sat together during the workshops and debated issues. One community member commented that:

*The way they ran it with the workshops and everything, I thought it was really good because there was a lot of hot debate going on and the fact that people were really motivated to debate things and you as a person could be up there doing it. I stood up on the stage and talked about it...you actually felt like part of the community by being able to have some input.*

Based on these factors, the community planning workshops were able to meet a number of the process and outcome criteria identified from the literature, including:

1. The workshops had clear goals and the workshop process was tied to those goals.
2. A full range of interests contributed to the community plans through the workshops.
3. The general community felt that they had real and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the strategy through the workshops.
4. There was broad social support for the outcomes of the community plans.
5. Workshop participants had a greater understanding of issues relating to growth and sustainability.

#### *4.2.2. Stage Two: Growth Option 2020*

Unfortunately, particularly given the success of the community planning workshops, the second stage of the process fell short of the council’s and the community’s expectations. When nothing appeared to happen to implement the outcomes of the community plans, a growing disillusionment and distrust developed in the community and it was in this atmosphere that the Growth Options 2020 workshops were launched. This disillusionment was due, in part, to a failure to adequately communicate to the community at the start the process what was going to follow, and secondly because of the lack of engagement over a long period of time (2 years) between the workshops and the options study. This latter issue was caused by the council realising at the completion of the community planning workshops, that the population and visitor number growth projections they were using were out of date and occasionally inaccurate and they needed to understand the consequences of growth better. Two council employees commented that perhaps the growth options study would have been a more appropriate place to begin the process. Overall, it appears that the process for the development of the growth management strategy was not adequately thought through and planned.

This had three main consequences. Firstly, a shared understanding did not exist between the council and the community of where the process was heading and how the community would be involved along the way. On reflection, a council staff member commented that:

*I don’t think we took the opportunity in those workshops strongly enough to say ‘this is only the first part of the process. We need you to now buy into it*

*and be part of what's going to take place'. So it was simmering away that 'well we've done our bit' and yet we had to kind of dust it all off and re-engage everybody with the Options 2020 stuff ... They saw, the initial workshops as 'The Process' ... and they felt that it was our role to go away and do it. Maybe we didn't pick that up enough.*

As a result of this lack of shared understanding, disillusionment in the community grew. They expected the outcomes of the community planning workshop to be developed into a growth management strategy immediately and implemented into the District Plan shortly thereafter. For example, one community member commented that:

*I think people wanted to see things implemented instantaneously, if there had been, even a year later, some follow up straight away. If you create something that huge, it's hard to get inertia. Get things moving. It had probably died out by the time it was 2004. From people's enthusiasm at Wanaka 2020 they had probably given up hope on that they had done anything or achieved anything.*

Secondly, it was perceived that what was presented in the Options 2020 document as an opportunity for the community to make choices regarding the shape of their future was in reality more a process to get the community to “buy into” a certain growth management approach. The way the material was presented in the growth options workshops made those community members who did participate feel that they had few options available to them. One community member commenting on the options presented at the Growth Options workshop said that:

*The options presented were pretty stark in the differences between them and quite often a preferred outcome from a person's point of view or a stakeholder's point of view was probably a combination of various aspects of one and various aspects of another.*

Other community members felt that attending the workshop was purposeless because they could not engage with the material actively and they felt that the content of the workshop appeared to be geared towards informing land owners what would happen to that land.

#### **4.2.3. Stage Three: Growth Management Strategy**

The lack of community engagement through the growth options stage meant that by the time the draft growth management strategy was released for submissions, there was virtually no community interest. The only person who turned up to the Open Day in Queenstown was a landowner whose land was outside the urban growth boundary and he threatened to take the council to court. One planner for the council commented that:

*In the end we've got a Growth Management Strategy and there wasn't much hoopla over that. I think we felt that ok we've taken the community through this and there wasn't anything new in the growth management strategy. The media didn't get very excited about it when we actually had it finally. We did come out very strongly talking about it as being the single key document, trying to give it momentum but it didn't really [have any]. We put it everywhere and we made it accessible but it didn't really generate a great deal of anything basically. Which surprised us a little bit.*

### **4.3. Key lessons**

Overall, the key lesson from this case study is the importance of keeping momentum. For a process that started with a high degree of excitement, motivation and commitment of all those

involved to end up with virtually no interest or involvement demonstrates a total failure to keep the community engaged through the journey. This failure was clearly compounded by the significant delays caused by a poorly planned strategy development process. The poorly planned strategy also meant that the normal staging of community engagement from the more general (issues and options) through to the more specific (design) was virtually back to front.

The key messages that emerge from this case study, therefore, are the need to: plan your strategy development process well to avoid unnecessary time delays; clearly communicate to the community how and when they will be involved; and keep people informed and involved as much as possible along the way. As a result, misunderstandings are likely to be reduced and community members are more likely to remain on the journey throughout the process.

Three other lessons also emerge from the successes of the community planning workshops. Firstly, when all participants are treated equally in the process, there is a greater ownership of the outcomes. Secondly, organising the process at arm's length from the council is a useful principle to adhere to in contexts where a significant lack of trust exists between the council and the community. Finally, taking the process seriously and illustrating that seriousness through actions builds trust and belief in the process.

## **5. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN THE WHANGAREI URBAN GROWTH STRATEGY**

### **5.1. Background**

The Whangarei District is primarily rural with a number of small but growing urban settlements located mainly on the coast. The largest urban settlement in the district is Whangarei. Whangarei is surrounded by rural land, positioned next to a deep water port, and includes a wide range of industrial activities that contribute to Whangarei's economy. Overall, Whangarei has a sprawling land-use pattern with a large amount of rural-residential development in the peri-urban area (see Figure 5.3).



**Figure 5.3:** Whangarei Harbour

The population of Whangarei is 74,500 (45,000 in the urban areas) with a large and growing population of Maori. Demographically, it has an over-representation of young people under the age of 15 and elderly people. This demographic has presented a particular challenge for the Whangarei District Council (WDC) with regard to finding the right people to fit with the right jobs, attracting new businesses to the city, and being able to provide for the city's aging

population. In addition to Whangarei's uneven demographic is the concern that in 20-30 years time the urbanised areas of the district may come under increasing pressure from a growing population, which will result in greater demands on essential infrastructure such as roading, water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure. Consequently, the need to develop an Urban Growth Strategy (UGS) was realised. Central to this, according to the WDC, was the need to develop a shared vision for the future with the community regarding the future of Whangarei.

Overall, a traditional approach to engaging the community was taken by the WDC to develop the UGS. Unlike with the QLDC, in the case of WDC the full CE process was designed and run in-house. The consultation techniques used included:

1. An information and feedback pack which was sent out to a list of over 200 stakeholders asking for comment on four pre-defined issues
2. An issues and options discussion paper developed from the feedback gathered from the feedback pack. This discussion paper was sent out to the same list of stakeholders asking for comment on the issues identified and the options provided.
3. An exercise developed to be used with high school students where they were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of what they liked and disliked.
4. A series of 15 public meetings one of which was a Hui with local Iwi (Maori) which included a question pack focused on each area that people could fill in
5. Final public meeting in which issues raised by the community were summarised on maps and presented back and people could rank the importance of the issues identified on the maps
6. A visioning exercise tagged onto a Community Expo where participants at the expo were asked to place dots beside the words that best described their vision of Whangarei.
7. The release of the UGS using formal consultation mechanisms.

## **5.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the WDC's approach**

The approach to involving the community in strategic urban planning in Whangarei had certain elements of success, however, overall, none of the process and outcome evaluation criteria identified from the literature review were completely met. Although the tools employed in each step had the potential to elicit useful information, the way in which they were used often meant that their efficacy was compromised.

Overall, their approach was mainly consultative, based on releasing written information and asking for feedback, rather than interactive, engaging people actively in a creative process. However, the WDC did attempt to incorporate some interactive and 'innovative' elements. Firstly, they tried to introduce a workshop element into the public meetings using small groups to encourage discussion between different interests. Secondly, the WDC ran an exercise with high school students using disposable cameras for students to capture what they liked and disliked about the community. Finally, a 'visioning' exercise at a local Community Expo and, consequently, they were able to engage a larger number and a broader range of participants from Whangarei who were attending this event.

### *5.2.1. Feedback packs*

The first contact many stakeholders had with the urban growth strategy was an "Information and Feedback Pack" that was mailed to them. The document contained some basic background headings on population and demographics, unemployment, and new business followed by a range of questions such as "How can we encourage more new businesses to set up in Whangarei?". There were also a series of poorly explained maps with some issues

located on them such as “potential area for rural residential”. Overall, this document was not very inviting and limited in its scope and it is doubtful if many of the broad range of stakeholders would have found it inspiring or engaging. It appeared to fail to capture the interest of a broad range of participants as evidenced by the small number of responses received (34 replies from 200 stakeholders). The design of the Issues and Options Discussion Document suffered from even more significant problems. It was longer and more detailed (43 pages of text and 22 A3 large scale black and white maps). This made it inaccessible to all but the most motivated respondents. It also had an even poorer response rate with only 19 replies (mostly other government agencies and businesses) from 200 stakeholders even though it covered a broader range of more specific issues. Both tools sought feedback in writing, thereby, restricting the potential for respondents to engage in discussion about different options for the future. Additionally, council staff felt that the tools also often failed to elicit useful information from those who did participate as many comments were too narrow and too specific e.g. the need to fix potholes on the local street or the need to build an equestrian arena, and overall “it was difficult to get people to think strategically ... beyond their own lifetime”.

### 5.2.2. Public meetings

A series of 15 public meetings were undertaken after the issues and options paper was released. A final public meeting to feedback and prioritise issues was also used. The success of these meetings was mixed. The council did attempt to include an interactive workshop element in the meetings that allowed participants to engage in a two way exchange of information with both the council and with other participants. This gave participants the opportunity to hear different perspectives and was seen to help generate a greater understanding of those perspectives. For example, council staff found that the workshop element of the public meetings worked well in getting people with opposing views to say what they wanted for a place and to hear contrasting viewpoints. They also felt they were successful in enabling people to feel their views were heard and valued, which built trust in the process. However, they were less successful in engaging with a wide range of participants as attendance was fairly low across these meetings (six 10 or fewer people; six 20-30 people; and four 45 to 55 people) and they were seen as over representative of “white people over 45”. The Hui was particularly disappointing with only 10 participants. In part, this might be due to the inaccessibility of the material provided in the feedback packs. It was also potentially due to what a council planner felt was as lack of understanding from the point of view of both council staff and the community of how to actively engage the community in planning.

*My conclusion was that people here are not accustomed to this kind of process at all ... They didn't have a sense of context for planning ... in this case I think people were just really caught off guard and I contribute that to a really bad attitude towards consultation in this community or nationwide, I don't know what it is, but it seems to be something that everybody wants to avoid at all costs.*

### 5.2.3. Exercise with high school students

A small aspect of the consultation process was an exercise that was developed for use with year 12 or 13 high school students, in which the council provided disposable cameras for students to take photos of aspects of the community they like and didn't like, as well as an opportunity to provide comments. Overall, the council staff felt that this aspect was not very successful as there was resistance from some of the schools who felt there was not enough

time to incorporate it in their curriculum. The comments themselves also showed a lack of critical engagement with the topic and included a large number of self-interested wishes such as removal of the liquor ban in town and more car parking at the high school.

#### *5.2.4. Visioning exercise*

The last aspect of their process involved including a ‘visioning’ exercise as part a Community Expo. Using the Community Expo as a platform for engagement succeeded in capturing the attention of a large and diverse number of participants. People attending the expo were given dots to place next to the words that they thought best described their vision for Whangarei and what they wanted their city to be. They were also able to add comments to the display walls. This simple approach was successful in promoting participation of a wider range of people. The input of children was considered particularly valuable by council planners because they were “quite thoughtful in their participation and a lot free-er in their thinking”.

This process was also successful in that, by taking advantage of an event that was already happening in the community, the council was able to engage a range of participants they may never have had access to, and in a way that was divorced from regular council processes. Engaging in processes that are not tied to regular council functioning are important because traditional consultation with local authorities is not generally perceived to be the most valuable or accessible way of having a voice.

However, given the simplicity of the method it is questionable how much impact this feedback could have had on the detail of the growth strategy or whether it was successful in engaging participants in some of the more difficult trade-offs involved in growth planning. Additionally, the timing of the event quite late in the strategy development process, after the strategy had moved into exploring issues and options, was a weakness. An activity of this type would have been more appropriate towards the beginning of the process as it would have generated interest at the start and could have been used to build interest in the more detailed stages of the strategy development.

### **5.3. Key Lessons**

In terms of the process and outcome criteria, although elements of the process that the WDC engaged in were successful, there was little evidence to suggest that any of the process and outcome criteria were met. Despite this, two key lessons emerged. The first is how incorporating an interactive element even into something as ‘traditional’ as a public meeting can improve the value of the process from the point of view of participants, in terms of feeling valued, and for council staff, in terms of the usefulness of the information generated. The second lesson is the potential value of ‘going to the community’ by linking creative processes to existing community events as a means to engage a much broader range of participants. This issue was also raised in relation to consultation with Iwi where the council planners felt in future the WDC needed to regularly go to Marae (community/spiritual centres for local Maori) to engage with individual iwi rather than expect them to come to an organised council event.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this research is to identify best practice principles and methods for community engagement in strategic growth management planning using the lessons learnt from an examination of two case studies of CE in growth management planning from New Zealand. This research found that, overall, the processes for engaging the community in strategic growth planning used by the WDC and the QLDC had successful elements; however, they

also experienced significant problems in (1) capturing the interest of the community, (2) keeping the community engaged throughout the strategy development processes, and (3) generating the type of discussion and information required by council planners to develop a robust strategy and get community buy-in and support for the strategy. Nevertheless, a number of key lessons emerged.

Firstly, in terms of the methods used to engage the community, the community design workshops used by the QLDC were arguably the most successful because they were creative and interactive, allowing participants to engage with other participants as well as with the workshop material, and because all participants were treated equally. Taking the principles of “arm’s length governance” and using ‘out of town’ facilitators and experts was also seen as a positive aspect of these workshops. Likewise, the tools used to advertise the community planning workshops were creative and engaging, for example, using steering committees to spread the word in the community.

To a lesser degree, the WDC also found that the workshop element of their public meetings was successful in making participants feel positively about their experience and believe that their opinions had been listened to and valued. Additionally in Whangarei, tagging a simple and interactive ‘visioning’ exercise onto a community expo that was already happening was also successful to the extent that the simplicity of the tool allowed the WDC to engage a broader range of participants.

However, in Whangarei, they were, overall, less successful in capturing the interest of and engaging the community. This was potentially due to the uninviting nature of the written materials that were sent around, but also likely to the differing context of the Whangarei and Queenstown Lakes communities.

The importance of context was strongly highlighted in the case studies, particularly with regard to the spatial extent of the settlements and the cohesiveness of the community; the social context of the communities, and the history of council-community engagement. The relatively small communities of Queenstown and Wanaka had a number of shared issues that each community felt strongly enough about to mobilise around, particularly around the pace, location, and type of development that was occurring. This concern was heightened by a lack of strategic planning on the part of the QLDC prior to 2001. Given the recreational focus of the communities, they also have a higher percentage of well-educated and medium to high income people in their community. Consequently, both the communities of Wanaka and Queenstown were highly motivated to have a voice in planning and were probably well equipped to do so. Whangarei, on the other hand, is a larger, more diverse, and more dispersed community. The various communities in the district also did not appear to have any concerns that all community members could mobilise around. Furthermore, the lack of a strong history of community engagement in this area seemed to be a barrier to participation. As a result the rates of participation were low throughout the main aspects of the process and the information that did emerge did not prove very helpful for developing the UGS.

The case studies also showed the importance of planning the overall UDS process well, including how the community can be involved throughout the process in a way that keeps momentum. The importance of keeping momentum was particularly highlighted in Queenstown and Wanaka, where despite the success of the first stage of the CE process, the council lost the interest and trust of the community.

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