



CONFERENCE 16/17th April 2007 Duxton Hotel Wellington

CASE STUDY

Wairarapa Combined District Plan

Carterton District Council, Masterton District Council
South Wairarapa District Council

Presenter

Wes ten Hove
Chief Executive Officer
Masterton District Council

Presented By

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Wairarapa Combined District Plan

Executive Summary

Three Wairarapa district councils agreed in 2002, to establish a joint committee to prepare the Wairarapa Combined District Plan (WCDP) as a single document to address the resource management requirements for Wairarapa. The preparation of the Wairarapa District Plan culminated in the formal release of the Proposed Plan in August 2006. The Proposed Plan submissions are currently subject to the second round of submissions. Hearings will conclude this term.

The Wairarapa Combined District Plan serves to provide a common approach to subdivision, management of coastal areas, infrastructure development, financial contributions, and it establishes (sub) regional priorities for industrial development.

Initial Environment

The Challenge

The three district councils were due (or close) to review their respective district plans to produce the second generation plans under the Resource Management Act. A number of joint initiatives had been in progress including development of a coastal management strategy, cooperation of the development of an extended area for potential heavy industry involving many joint issues and discussion on a more common approach to financial development contributions.

The development of the new plan was acknowledged to be an extensive piece of work for each Council to do individually. Many of the region's property owners (particularly commercial/rural) would have interests in two if not three districts and would be faced with varying timeframes and potentially different resource management policies for substantially similar issues.

By combining and cooperating on this work, efficiencies were seen as being beneficial not just for the district councils in sharing the costs of the research and preparation of new document, but also to the submitters who would be able to take advantage of the single process.

The history of close cooperation among the three territorial authorities in Wairarapa has been longstanding. More recently Greater Wellington was included in the production of the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy to cater for regional perspectives on coastal management. The Wairarapa Combined District Plan gives effect to the land use elements of the Wairarapa Coastal Strategy

The Project

Legal Framework

The RMA and Local Government Act respectively allow for joint committees and joint preparation of district plans. Legal advice was obtained to verify the structure and delegations required to ensure the legal status of the decision making process.

The delegations agreed to by the three Councils were succinct. The Joint Committee was simply tasked to prepare the Combined District Plan for the three Wairarapa territorial authorities. Each Council was represented equally by two members, the Committee therefore comprising 6 elected members.

Cost Share

The Councils early on agreed the costs would be shared on a population/capital value basis, being approximately Masterton District Council 60%, Carterton District Council and South Wairarapa District Councils 20% each.

The consultation process has been difficult to estimate or quantify in fixed budget terms, given the need to respond to the submissions and any possible Environment Court proceedings that may follow. The Councils have set an annual contribution which meets most of the costs and this is likely to be extended to cover any additional future costs. This will spread largely over the anticipated life of the new plan. Over the last five years, these costs have amounted to some \$1,000,000 and the current annual budget of \$250,000 may run for a further year or two depending on possible Environment Court costs.

Resourcing

For the period March 2002 to June 2004, the Councils engaged a dedicated planning officer on staff, reporting to the Joint Committee, through the three Council CEOs. The objective for this engagement was the production of an initial draft of the combined plan, following stakeholder discussions with key agencies, e.g. Department of Conservation, Greater Wellington, Iwi, Federated Farmers etc.

With further planning consultancy input, the initial draft was released as a discussion document over the period December 2004 - February 2005 as part of a non-statutory consultation process. The project is currently supported by the Councils' existing planning staff and specialist consultancy support as required.

Joint Planning Committee Role

The Joint Committee in the initial stages provided monitoring and budget approvals, with the chair of the committee rotating amongst the mayors.

Once the initial draft had been completed, the Joint Committee itself was tasked to deal more directly with the planning issues. Different perspectives arising

from the respective Council's histories needed to be brought to a common approach which would be optimal for the Wairarapa region.

It was recognised that 'one size' would not fit all the planning needs of distinct communities of interest. Local characteristics (e.g. Greytown's Main Street Heritage compared with Masterton's CBD retail and commercial character) were recognised as justifying differing planning perspectives

Following the initial resolution of these matters, the Joint Committee released a non statutory discussion document for informal consultation. The issues raised by the public response to this document were considered by the Joint Committee. The Committee members had to resolve differences and agree to the policies to be put in the proposed Plan. This ensured the assumption of 'political ownership' of the policies underpinning the next stage of the project.

The achievement of 'political ownership' was partly attributable to the consensus among the three councils to stabilise the chairpersonship of the Committee. Rather than the chair of the committee revolving among the mayor of the three districts, a revolving chair, a permanent chair was agreed to, resulting in a more consistent political leadership for the project as backgrounding the formal meetings of the Joint Committee.

Hearings

The Committee will shortly begin hearings of the submissions, the target being the completion of all hearings by the end of this term, leaving only potential Environment Court proceedings to be completed before the Plan is adopted.

The hearings will be a test for the members as this will be the final opportunity to determine the policies on which the combined plan.

Joint District Plan Administration

Early on in the project it was decided by the three CEOs that 'form should follow function'. The administration differences among the Councils were a potential impediment to the successful completion of the project. Accordingly, it was agreed that the details of how the plan was to be administered at each Council level, while retaining the subregional overview was a secondary issue not a primary issue. Some planning staff were initially sceptical of the project or possibly even patch-protective.

The administration of the joint district plan will require a cooperative approach among the planning staff of three district councils to achieve consistent interpretation and application of the plan's provisions. This will be achieved by regular meetings of the planners independently chaired, to ensure a common approach is delivered where common provisions apply. Consent applications will be processed by each district which has jurisdiction over the subject area. Joint hearings committees (or commissioners as may be required from time to time) will be established to deal with consent hearings and appeals.

Technical Challenges

Notwithstanding the understanding that there was a high degree of technical compatibility in the respective GIS and mapping databases, the combination of the data into a single set of consistent information protocols and standards of accuracy, proved to be more time consuming than originally expected. This added perhaps some 6 months of intensive background work to the project. As a plus however, a number of data and property errors were able to be corrected. This work would have had to be done at an individual council level when each council would otherwise next be reviewing its own plan. As a lesson, I would have wanted to plan for this technical challenge in anticipation rather than in retrospect.

Transferability/Adaptability

The LGA and RMA allow for a joint plan to be developed and administered. No new legislation is required. There has to be a strong political will driving each council and a high degree of trust amongst elected members, and professional staff. A culture nurturing such trust has to be maintained for the life of the project and in this case, for the anticipated life of the plan.

If this cooperative environment exists in other regions, then it can be applicable to those jurisdictions.

The public has seen the sense of the combined plan. Individual views will vary once specific interests are affected by the plan's provisions. The resolution of these different perspectives into a robust planning document will be the proof of the pudding.

Conclusion

As described above, a good environment of political and professional cooperation and trust is a critical part of the project. The cost sharing efficiency gains of the joint process are estimated to be approximately 20% less than the combined costs of three separate individually prepared plan reviews - noting that the litigation component of such plans is highly variable. The overall project cost will approximate \$1.5m.

At an individual rate payer level this saving will be greater for those submitters who would otherwise deal with three district plans. Each Council has avoided cross boundary issues which are now subsumed in the common provisions of the plan. The unquantifiable gains include more sustainable resource management policies for those parts of the Wairarapa environment in which each of our three districts have a common interest

For Wairarapa Combined Plan details refer: - www.mstn.govt.nz

Contact for Further Information

Name: Wes ten Hove
Local authority: Masterton District Council
Address Street: 64 Chapel Street Masterton
Address Mailing: PO Box 444 Masterton
Phone: 06 378 9666
Fax: 06 378 8400
E-mail: wes@mstn.govt.nz