

## CREATING SUSTAINABLE URBAN / RURAL LINKAGES

The issue of creating sustainable linkages between our urban areas and rural areas, including rural villages is not a new one. We have all probably sat through turgid lectures about Ebenezer Howard and the garden city movement in the 1890's with its ideas of planned, self-contained communities surrounded by greenbelts, and containing carefully balanced areas of residences, industry, and agriculture. It is also an issue that has been at the forefront of policy making considerations since at least the 1970's at both an international, national and local level.

In an Auckland context these ideas and issues are still highly relevant and some exciting ideas have developed over recent years in trying to tackle them. I think we all aspire to a new generation of more consolidated and design influenced planning documents. Such documents present an opportunity to continue to refine ideas and find better solutions.

While there is a relatively well articulated and increasingly well accepted set of arguments and evidence for promoting the theory of 'smart growth' in urban areas, there is, we would suggest, a great deal less clarity about what planners and developers should seek to achieve in rural areas and even less clarity about managing urban fringe areas.

As professionals, we're getting better at implementing smart growth theory and considering a wider range of factors in policy making by planning the growth of urban areas around neighbourhoods that are diverse in use and population, designed for pedestrian and mixed mode transit, shaped by accessible public places and institutions, with buildings and landscape architecture that respond to local features.

**This then raises the questions of how do these principles translate to planning land areas beyond the city limits? Are these principles relevant in a rural context?**

In a large rural district like the previous Rodney District where the population density is less than 15 houses per square km (and considerably lower if HBC is not included) transit oriented development, for example, is not part of the planning conversation.

In our view it is quite wrong for our planning practise to promote the antithesis of what we promote in urban centres, in rural areas that are less accessible, less connected, more sparsely populated; and where communities often have an entirely different focus to urban communities.



It sounds obvious, but while it was always politically untenable for a rural Council to blithely assume that preserving a patchwork of green vistas from any and all signs of urban influence should be an all conquering objective for rural areas, this may no longer be the case in the urban dominated amalgamated Auckland Council - and potentially in other areas where governance of city and country could in future be combined.

It is our contention that in a broad sense, current objectives for planning rural areas are one of 'everything and nothing'. Policy often strongly seeks to retain and enhance rural character and amenity values while at the same time the rules acknowledge the need for rural areas to accommodate a wide range of land use activities from rural residential living opportunities to industrial like activities that cannot appropriately be located in urban industrial areas. This creates a muddle for practitioners and often a confusing policy framework that lacks clarity in setting a clear direction. Even when stripping the matters of importance set out in the RMA down to their raw words, including achieving social, economic and cultural well being objectives, this still seems to leave the vast majority of rural areas as a building site awaiting a set of pretty drawings, a pile of consultant reports and a thrusting finance company to back any proposal.

We aspire to flexibility and responsiveness to promoting opportunities for great developments, lifestyle choices etc, but also seek to preserve the key features that make rural areas rural and differentiate them from urban areas; with for example high degrees of open space and naturalness mixed with apparent rural land use activities such as farming, cropping, orcharding etc.

Policy at both the district and regional levels tends to fall into the camp of creating awkward and contentious definitions and rule frameworks that imply that if an area is not within defined urban limits then it is rural. Such definitions and rule frameworks do not acknowledge the vast differentiation in character and land use activity existing through much of our existing rural areas. 'Black and white' policy and rule frameworks like this do not enable flexibility nor do they enable a variety of appropriate responses to community desires for a range of living opportunities in rural areas. Rather such 'black and white' policy tends to imply that all 'rural activities' short of creating calamitous effects are, in most rural areas acceptable and urban activities are not.

It is less black and white in district policy however. With areas on the urban periphery zoned specifically for countryside living; a large number of special zones and out of zone scheduled activities provided for rural areas are places where hard to consent activities such as cleanfills, quarries and concrete crushing activities for example often need to locate.

While the land resource is finite, demands for space and planning permission for activities like motorcross tracks and slurry disposal sites, grows apace with the Regions' population



and the associated demand for sensitive activities like child care centres, filming sites, aquaculture, tourist activities including visitor accommodation; and above all rural residential development.

Rural production activities which are a critical component of the local economy and influence the landscape character of rural areas, are highly sensitive to the suburbanisation of the countryside. Rural production activities are also impacted by the huge changes in land value that are occurring. Play space for urban dwellers, conservation objectives and other values all vie with each other for traction in interminable debates about what should be valued, prioritised, facilitated, discouraged or protected.



For professionals working to develop policy for rural areas the challenge is to get beyond the idea of seeing rural areas as a contest of competing and mutually hostile values. By acknowledging the interdependence of small rural centres with both their rural surroundings and with neighbouring urban centres a better approach to future planning can emerge.





Achieving sustainability requires that we have to, for example, be conscious about food miles. That means making provision for food to be able to be grown locally by retaining sufficient land areas in close proximity to urban areas to grow a variety of food types. It also means being conscious of achieving social and community outcomes. This includes retaining and enhancing the support infrastructure provided for the rural economy in and around villages. A recent article from the New York Times (7 February 2011) states that *"We're in the middle of a global food crisis – the second in three years... These soaring prices have only a modest effect on U.S. inflation,... but they're having a brutal impact on the worlds' poor.... The consequences of this food crisis go far beyond economics..."*<sup>1</sup>



There is a strong case for creating robust rural / urban linkages. In the Auckland Region rural areas exist on the periphery of New Zealand's largest metropolitan area. The urban population relies on these rural areas as sources of food production, areas of open space, and as a recreational resource. There is an historical pattern to the patchwork creation of rural residential living opportunities and urban sprawl on the periphery of our larger urban areas , particularly in areas that are desirable environments to locate, such as along the East Coast and within close travel time to the CBD.

Apart from the obvious benefits rural areas provide urban areas when they are close by, such as supplying drinking water, fresh food and aggregates for construction, they also provide recreational spaces and experiences, open space buffer areas and often contribute significantly to the amenity enjoyed by those living on the urban periphery. They are also the necessary receiving areas for refuse, clean fill material and in some cases wastewater.

People living in rural areas also often rely on urban areas as sources of employment, for access to non-essential goods and services, cultural diversity and entertainment. For example, in Rodney a large study of rural landowners reported that less than 10% of land

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/07/opinion/07krugman.html>





owners earn more than half their income from the use of the land<sup>2</sup>. Rural people close to cities seem to have the same propensity to generate vehicle trips as their urban counterparts they are just more accustomed to travelling further as a trade off for living in a location that is preferable to them<sup>3</sup>.

Strong migration into Rodney mainly from within Auckland and other parts of New Zealand, characterised by a consistent demand for rural residential living opportunities, has seen the face of rural centres change dramatically over the last 20 years. For example, places such as Matakana, Warkworth, Huapai and Kumeu were very recently small rural service towns with a primarily rural farming based population. Changes in land use activity from pastoral farming and forestry activities to a range of activities such as vineyards, wineries, specialist horticultural produce such as blueberries, the establishment of cafes, galleries and other tourist destination activities have generated significant changes. Within these villages the demand has altered from essentially agricultural goods and services to a broader demand for specialty goods and services including entertainment.

Warkworth, Huapai and Kumeu are now important service towns and have been identified as significant commercial and residential growth areas. Matakana Village now boasts a movie theatre, at least 5 separate eateries, bars and boutique shops. More growth and development for Matakana (with capacity for a further 600 homes) is signalled in a Draft Rule Package.



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<sup>2</sup> Rural Lifestyle Preferences in Rodney, Nexus Planning and Research 2008

<sup>3</sup> Background research paper for the RLTS determined the average trip length in rural areas to be around 10kms compared to 6.7kms in urban areas (52% longer); and that trip generation was only fractionally lower (8.76 per day vs 8.92 per day)



Places like Whitford, Matakana and Coatesville are increasingly popular visitor locations. People visit these areas for a variety of events such as farmers markets, eateries and their close proximity to highly valued recreational areas. This visitor economy is one where the production functions of the area are intrinsically linked to the clearly non-urban rural and recreational experience that visitors travel there to consume. The visitor economy is related to the diversity of activities and services available and the environmental quality of the locality.

Rural 'villages' in Auckland play a variety of roles depending upon the make-up of the wider population and the surrounding land uses. A number of these villages, particularly adjacent to coastal areas are almost exclusively for holidaymakers and the retired, whilst at the other extreme some are low intensity versions of a commuter suburb, driven solely by the amenity of their location, and function with little interaction with their surrounds. Many villages however are based on historic patterns of development and on the backbone of strong rural farming communities.

We are not promoting rural areas being able to accommodate a significant proportion of the growth expected in Auckland however there are certain rural villages in Auckland that can provide a relatively compact and land-efficient means of providing for a variety of rural lifestyle options. Such a lifestyle can be provided as an alternative to countryside living and its well documented adverse effects on the efficiency of the transport network, the landscape character of the countryside and the viability of rural production. Contained growth in and around villages can provide a stronger base for support services for farmers and foster a more profitable, diverse and therefore resilient rural economy and community.

The phrase 'certain villages' is quite deliberate. In the same way as we are highly strategic about choosing locations for new urban development based on Transit Oriented Development (backing areas with significant potential for significant employment, evidence of market support for intensification etc) it makes sense to identify the basic building blocks for existing rural communities to inform the policy direction for viable future growth and development.

How growth is promoted and enabled obviously affects how and where communities grow and develop. There is strong potential for small rural communities to be enhanced through enabling various forms of growth whilst maintaining areas of open space and a rural character.

From our experience, some of the key building blocks of strong, successful rural communities are:

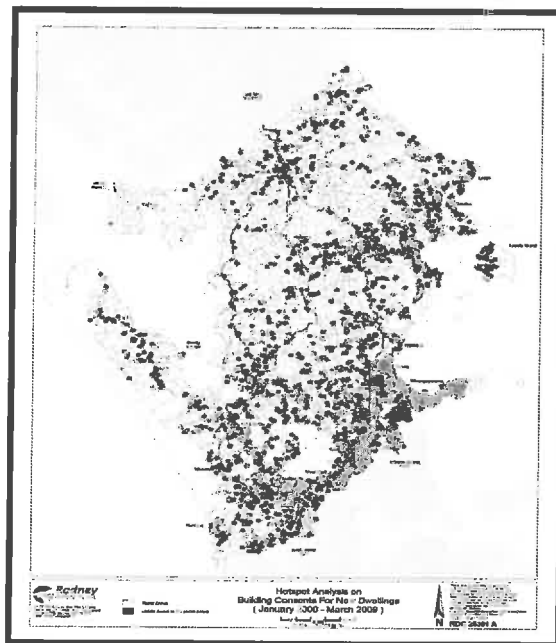


### **Primary Schools:**

It is hard to overstate the importance of the local primary school as a focus for building sustainable rural communities. For better or worse, primary schools have replaced the dancehall and the church as the heart of rural communities. They are the mustering point, the water well of all gossip, the soap box, the concert venue, the rallying point, and the nexus of the amazing volunteerism in successful rural communities.

### **Attractiveness factors:**

While there is no shortage of ideas about how to make some of these centres into little utopia's, there is no getting away from the fact that the landscape setting of some areas is just more attractive than other areas. Analysis of the location of new building consents, employment locations and census trends was used in Rodney's growth planning as a useful cross check of subjective judgements about the attractiveness of locations.



### **Infrastructure capacity:**

It is tempting to allow engineering issues to dominate decision making on urban intensification locations. The accessibility of transport links as well as the capacity of water and wastewater infrastructure (and the affordability of expanding them) are critical issues. While it hasn't scuppered the success of Matakana, limitations in water, wastewater capacity and transport links is a major stumbling block for the development of a host of rural settlements. These issues need to be addressed to avoid failure. There is debate about the relative costs of providing stand-alone infrastructure to facilitate pockets of growth in rural areas compared to bolting onto existing large scale urban infrastructure which may alter significantly with better cheaper technology. But regardless, decisions



around this need to be considered bearing in mind our hopes for rural areas and the risks and opportunity cost of ignoring their needs and potential.

**A diverse economy:**

Successful vibrant rural areas tend to have a diverse economy. While the growth of the rural area can certainly assist with the diversification and resilience of a local economy, a range of existing cottage industries and visitor oriented businesses like pottery production and galleries, visitor destinations provide a fertile ground for creating destination rural communities.

**Events:**

Strong rural communities are active. This is reflected in a wide variety of community organised and supported activities involving the immediate rural community and which attract visitors from far afield such as calf club days, sports clubs, annual A+P shows and outdoor cinema for example.



A number of recent planning initiatives seek to recognise the value of small rural communities – ‘villages’ - and build upon the characteristics and strengths of these communities to achieve regional growth goals. Such initiatives include:

**Farm Parks:**

Rodney Council for some time provided for farm parks in its district plan as a way of promoting the redevelopment of large rural sites to provide for rural living on collectively managed park or farm-like surrounds. The Council ultimately rejected the idea as being at odds with its key approach of allowing small numbers of small lots to be created in return for a suite of highly prescribed environmental benefits (mainly through protecting the many scattered fragments of bush and wetland). Part of the Council decision was a concern about

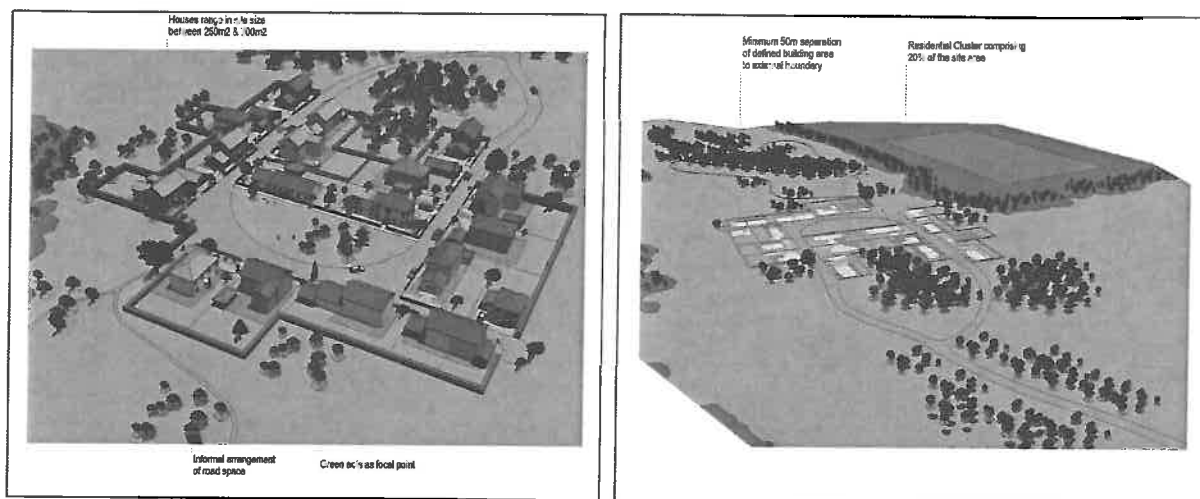




gated communities and significant amounts of settlement in locations that could be physically removed from any concept of community. In addition there were concerns about the extent to which collectively rural residents could practically steward large areas of land and also about the durability and capability of body corporate structures in making land management decisions.

### Hamlets:

In looking at finalising the rural chapter of the Rodney District Plan, a provision was added enabling the establishment of a 'hamlet'. This site specific provision allows development rights to be transferred from the wider rural area and realised within a single consolidated development, reasonably proximate to an existing rural centre. The benefit is to consolidate rural development rather than have these entitlements developed in situ on sites that are scattered across the district. As a precautionary measure the rule package that has been developed has only been applied to one site within the District, but it is clear that additional sites may be added for consideration under the Rule by way of plan change.



### Green Belts:

Areas on the edge of large metropolitan areas such as Auckland can be identified as 'greenbelts' to hold the urban edge and protect the rural environment within and beyond these areas. The term 'green belt' does not necessarily mean that development cannot occur in these areas, they do not necessarily have to be park land. Rather the characteristics that make an area suitable as a green belt need to be clearly identified with suitable patterns and forms of development that maintain, protect and / or enhance these characteristics promoted. The issue of creating 'greenbelts' and also what in fact a 'greenbelt' is in a New Zealand context, were issues debated through the development of the Rodney District Plan 2000. In the context of regional policy, historic development patterns and existing planning provisions the Council took the approach of providing a large belt-like countryside living zone between Riverhead and Stillwater. This zone restricts the



range of rural production activities that can occur within it, which to many is the antithesis of what a “green belt” should do which is to constrain development opportunities and facilitate rural productive activities.

**Rural Strategy:**

Other initiatives include the recently completed ‘Rural Strategy’ which addresses growth and development options for the rural communities and areas in the northern part of the Region (formerly the Rodney District Council).

Rodney’s Rural Strategy acknowledges the unique characteristics and special qualities of rural areas. It also acknowledges the value that rural areas provide for those who live in the urban areas around which these rural areas lie.

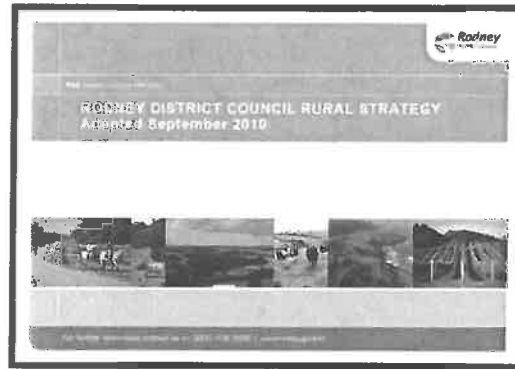
The Strategy identifies a range of different living environments, in part acknowledging existing development patterns and also the ability of certain areas to accommodate additional development whilst also achieving regional growth and rural development objectives. For example the strategy identifies and mapped as a future land use plan:

- Bush Living Environment
- Mixed Rural Production Environment
- Rural Lifestyle Environment
- Rural Production Environment

The Rural Strategy suggests a range of methods for increasing intensification within parts of the rural environment. It also seeks to enable a range of activities to occur whilst minimising conflicts between the expectations of people living in rural areas and those utilising the land for rural productive purposes. Other goals are to maintain rural character and amenity values and protect the productive qualities of the land resource. In particular the Strategy identifies further opportunities to make use of transferrable development rights from highly sensitive or production focused areas where growth can be very problematic to more appropriate locations. The Franklin Rural Plan change is also noteworthy in seeking to achieve similar outcomes.

The Rural Strategy is one tool that the then Rodney District Council, and now the Auckland Council will use, to inform where and how growth occurs with the view to achieving strong rural urban connections.





How rural communities develop, and how growth in rural areas is managed, is as important to the rural areas, as it is to achieving sustainability in an overall sense for urban areas.

Some recent projects, such as the rezoning of land at Coatesville for countryside living opportunities and rezoning of land at Huapai for residential development, have adopted a detailed structural analysis approach towards identifying the most suitable areas for various types of development including open space. In different ways these projects have looked to integrate development around physical constraint issues and protecting key local characteristics.

In our view there is significant opportunity to enhance existing rural communities by providing for some additional growth whilst protecting the unique features and characteristics of each village. By providing for some location specific growth in identified rural areas, rural communities can be enhanced, they can become more self sufficient and sustainable in the long term. Alongside this, the wider rural area can be retained as a rural productive area for a wide variety of rural land use activities.

Planning in a directive manner for the growth of rural villages retains the ability to provide for a variety of rural and urban living opportunities within the Region whilst minimising ad hoc residential development in the wider rural areas. This minimises reverse sensitivity issues and assists with enabling the continuation and expansion of a wide range of rural productive activities including activities that need to locate in rural areas on the periphery of the metropolis.

In order to achieve such outcomes it is important to set a clear policy direction that states the outcomes to be achieved for specific locations. For example some areas will have the function of providing a green belt, other areas village living opportunities, and in other areas rural production activities may be the focus.



There is a balance to be achieved in providing for growth and expanding urban development whilst retaining rural areas that fulfil important food growing, recreational, open space, ecological and environmental functions.

We have learned that strict policy seeking to fortify urban boundaries and strictly categorise and urban activities as separate from rural activities has not necessarily achieved outcomes that enable the sustainable growth and development of rural areas. Such policies instead can work to limit opportunities for diversification of rural activities and communities, factors that appear to be important if rural areas are to be sustainable and retain their specific identifiable rural characteristics in the long term.

There is a balance though in that any policy does need to recognise and contemplate the potential for adverse effects to occur in a cumulative manner that would erode the factors that clearly define an area as rural rather than urban. Such factors include those features of rural areas that make them attractive to visit, live in, recreate in and do business.

Within the Auckland Region we have an opportunity to create policy that acknowledges the unique and special characteristics of our rural areas, as we do for our urban areas, whilst enabling diversity of land uses and development of rural communities.

Ian Bayliss  
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