

Local Government Commission
PO Box 5362
Wellington 6145

(Submitted online to: submissions@lgc.govt.nz)

Draft proposal for local government in the Wellington region

This submission is made on behalf of an organisation, **Mt Victoria Historical Society Inc.**

It is an incorporated society with the aims of researching and sharing the history of the suburb of Mt Victoria and promoting interest in, and preservation of, its unique heritage.

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Mt Victoria Historical Society opposes the proposal for a single council for the Wellington region for the following reasons:

Principles

Subsidiarity

The reports frequently state that this proposal reflects the principle of “subsidiarity” by allowing decisions to be made at an appropriate level, and particularly emphasising the power of local decision-making by repeated statements such as:

Providing for local boards reflects the principle of subsidiarity and a new balance between local decision-making and action and regional decision-making and action, and better reflects present and future needs of communities. [Vol 1, 5.7]

We do not believe that this proposal enhances local decision-making. In fact, the contrary – we believe that there will be less ability for local communities to make decisions on what affects them because local boards:

- may put forward plans, but these must be approved by GWC
- may request funding, but for a limited range of activities and subject to “agreed local boards funding policy, plans and agreements”
- only have a clear “responsibility and accountability” for administrative activities such as “tenders, service levels and applications for use” (Technical Report page 270).

In everything else, it appears that the GWC would decide what is the province of local boards and what powers or functions it retains for itself (see page 45 of the summary report “Delegation of decision-making responsibilities”).

Local Democracy

In the light of the lack of real powers assigned to local boards, we do not believe that this proposal delivers on the requirement for local democracy. A regional grouping of nearly half a million people stretching from Wellington to Kapiti Coast and the Wairarapa, with all significant decision-making vested in a single council, does not meet the definition of local government in the Local Government Act 2002 of enabling “democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities”. The definition of community in almost every dictionary includes something to the effect that it consists of people “sharing common interests”.

We do not believe that such a large council will be as close to, and as accountable to, local communities as is desirable in good local government. It will also give disproportionate decision-making power to councilors who have no stake in the community and environment about which they are making decisions.

Planning

We oppose the removal of planning powers from local communities into a single authority which is covering an area that is so wide and has such varied interests. The interests of the communities in Kapiti, Wellington city and the Wairarapa, for instance are too diverse to be covered by one authority. Some planning efficiencies could be achieved through other means, but it is also essential that local communities have the right to develop plans which define and express the kind of future they want. We do not believe, as the summary report says at 1.25, that this proposal:

- affords the greatest scope to simplify planning, while at the same time ensuring that there is an effective local voice in decision-making

Specific heritage-related concerns

The matters of principle raised above have flow-on effects to many areas of community life but we address specifically heritage-related issues, which are our particular concern. In terms of heritage, we believe the impact will be negative and potentially detrimental to the national interest as well as local communities.

We note for instance that, in the table on page 45 of the summary report under “Environmental and heritage activities and projects”, it states that the GWC would be responsible for “Regional policies, prioritisation and co-ordination” while local boards have no input (“n/a”).

Heritage

A great deal of New Zealand’s heritage has been preserved only due to dedicated and persistent action by local communities, who understand the meaning and value of historic buildings, sites or areas.

There is considerable risk that, in a system where planning is dominated by an organisation and elected members who have no knowledge or understanding of the history (and its contribution to the environment and sense of place) of an area, local heritage values will be disregarded. It is, however, frequently the sum of 'local' heritage which ensures we have a meaningful and attractive future national heritage.

The ability of the community to interact with a governing body which also understands and has a stake in heritage will be removed. We note for instance that, in the table on pg 46 of the summary report under Regulatory services, it is proposed that a local board would only have "input into notification of decisions for resource consent applications". This is unacceptable.

In an environment where the driver for amalgamation appears to be only economic efficiency, we fear for what heritage remains in Wellington city - and other cities or towns in the region.

Town Belt

We would have particular concerns for the future of the Town Belt, which was given to the citizens of Wellington for public recreation purposes for ever, to be held in trust by Wellington City Council.

A single council structure which has no appreciation for this unique heritage shaping Wellington city potentially has the power to make decisions which steadily diminish this.

Special Reserves

In a similar vein, the status and character of special reserves such as the Basin Reserve could be even more threatened than they currently are. This reserve, like the Town Belt, was a gift to the people of Wellington city to be held in trust forever for the purposes of recreation. It is evident that even the current Greater Wellington Regional Council does not appreciate or respect this.

Conclusion

Mt Victoria Historical Society opposes the current proposals for amalgamation.