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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light – 14 September 2024 – “ Accessible Kaipara District? Yeah, nah!”**

In Tai Tokerau we love the good old catch-all retort- ‘yeah nah! On the face of it, it is an ambiguous response. But what it really means is ‘ Yes, I understand what you mean, but NO. A more formal and vaguely pompous version of giving this message is “noted”.

I had the privilege several months ago on being on an advisory panel to help develop a Te Tai Tokerau Regional Accessibility Strategy.

This was intended to be a cohesive regional approach allowing councils (Whangarei District, Far North District, Northland Regional Council and Kaipara District), to share resources and learnings to work better together for our communities across boundaries. The plan intends to give Te Tai Tokerau a shared vision, values, outcomes, and actions to improve accessibility and the experiences of people with access needs. It talks about what we can do to make Te Tai Tokerau more inclusive and accessible for everyone. The plan also serves as a strategic framework for each individual council to develop their own implementation or action plans, which would be made available on individual council websites when ready. Seems a no-brainer, right?

I was excited by the prospect of an accessible Northland, not only because this would go a long way to make our region non-disabling, but by the potential economic benefits to the region. Having a region that is accessibility connected through both transport and infrastructure, would enable us to become a desirable destination for tourists who are seeking an accessible experience. The bulk of these tourists these days tend to be older and have more disposable income as opposed to the younger adventure-seeking tourist who bolts down to Queenstown for a bungy jump. They are a lucrative market.

The strategy was developed by staff from the four councils in Northland and a working group made up of people with access needs (including myself). There was also wide consultation with the disability community. The strategy was then ready to be adopted by the four councils.

The Northland Regional Council met on 23 July and following after discussions about the importance of accessibility in the Northland region and the wide spread considerations articulated in the strategy, they voted unanimously to adopt it.

On 27 June, the Whangarei District Council discussed the strategy at their meeting with Councillor Peeters remarking that “it would give our region a good marketing strategy”. The WDC unanimously voted to adopt the strategy.

On 11 July, the Far North District Council held their meeting where the strategy was also discussed. Their focus was on how the strategy could start to be implemented before waiting for the next Annual Plan cycle started. They too unanimously voted to adopt it.

Unfortunately, the Kaipara District Council was a completely different kettle of fish. On the 28 August at their council meeting, it was announced that there was a change in the motion to adopt the strategy to a motion to “note” the strategy. There was some discussion about what ‘noting’ actually meant. For a while it seemed there was no black and white answer to this. From watching the video of the meeting, it seems clear to me that this would mean a clear diluting of commitment to the strategy.

Councillor Wilson-Collins outlined that there would be no cost - it would be business as usual, as the strategy doesn’t change any process regarding building or resource consent processes. What it does is ensure that staff are trained to recognise the needs of the most vulnerable marginalised people in the community. Surely, it’s time to think about basic ethics and equity in servicing our community, and yet Kaipara can’t even adopt a policy to promote this?

Three councillors raised their concerns about not adopting the strategy, but only ‘noting it’. Councillor Wilson-Collins put forward an amendment that the motion go back to it’s original form to adopt the strategy. This was promptly voted down by councillors who felt that the strategy would expose them to future costs and impose additional documentation that would stop the Kaipara District Council’s ability to be “flexible” in the future. The Council then voted to simply ‘note’ the strategy. Speaking of noting it’s interesting note that the Kaipara District Council is the only District Council in Northland that does not have a Disability Advisory Group, go figure!

I rang Councillor Wilson-Collins and asked her how she felt about the Kaipara District Council’s decision. She said, *“I’m disappointed with this decision of Council. By only noting the strategy, we have put concerns around resource consents and the building code before people’s needs and failed to commit to promote equality, inclusion, and participation for all.”*

The Kaipara District Council also voted to disestablish their Maori Ward Te Moananui o Kaipara. Kaipara District and Upper Hutt City are the only two councils out of more than 40 with Māori wards to disestablish them. Would I like to live in the Kaipara District? Yeah nah!

*Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation*