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Turning Community Wealth into Community Health

The issues facing the Te Akau Waingaro District

**For Primary Industry Council/Kellogg Rural leadership
Programme 2002**

Executive Summary

Turning community wealth into community health

Issues facing the Te Akau Waingaro District.

The aim of this report is to present solutions to the perceived problem of encouraging successful young farmers of the district to take a more active role in community affairs. This will relate back to the period when the Te Akau complex was constructed, and will then apply the lessons learnt from that time to the present situation. This will result locally in the improvement of living conditions in the Te Akau Waingaro District.

Four issues are discussed.

1. Reducing the barrier of a large first hurdle. With the removal of past organizations that created a pathway for further leadership opportunities, solutions must be found to encourage potential leaders. Local Government has a role to play in establishing forums for individuals to develop their skills. Whilst School boards fulfil this role to a degree they do have limitations.
2. Lack of experience. This may be the simplest problem to overcome, as the experience is available within the district. The best application however would be in the form of mentoring the incoming generation rather than demonstrating it. A formal structure will be required for the mentors. The former producer Boards and their successors are ideally placed to provide this role.
3. Lack of uncommitted time. The solutions to the extended time taken for legislative compliance lie in the hands of local and central government. The solution needs to be creative so the cost does not become excessive. An answer will be to remove the perception of lack of time in the mind of the potential leaders.
4. Lack of team dynamics/support groups. The negative criticism often encountered in public leadership roles is a real discouragement to the younger generation in Te Akau. Therefore the role of other organisations such as rural woman must be a positive one to overcome this. The existing awards system can be enhanced to promote worth in the community.

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Introduction

Recently New Zealand Agriculture has experienced growth not seen for over two decades. Farmers have harnessed new technology and systems to grow their businesses to take advantage of favourable market conditions. In many cases this has taken exceptional leadership and business skills to achieve these aims.

At the same time rural communities are under pressure to provide a stable and close-knit environment for its members. School rolls are falling; living conditions and roading are deteriorating. Forceful and innovative leadership from within those communities is required to overcome these issues.

One such community is the Te Akau Waingaro district of the west coast of North Waikato. It is unique in the quality and quantity of leaders that have come from within the community and the achievements that these men and woman have realized. The district is predominantly sheep and beef farming with a small influx of life stylers in recent years. It is an area proud of its rich history and currently still has pioneering families present.

A notable accomplishment of the community was the building of the Te Akau Waingaro community complex 25 years ago. Housing a nine-hole golf course, Rugby field, Polo field, indoor Badminton court, changing rooms and two function rooms, it is a testament to their efforts.

Built in similar economic conditions that prevail today, and by people at a similar stage of their lives to the successful young farmers in the district today, it is a unique opportunity to examine and draw parallels that will help deal with the issue of today's leadership in the district. The challenges that individuals overcame in their personal development to fund and construct the Complex are not too dissimilar to those faced by those capable today of assuming a leadership role in the community.

In recent times there has been a perceived lack of younger individuals willing to take on the mantle of leadership. Some of the hurdles currently faced, seem to be barrier for today's potential leaders to taking the next step.

The purpose of this project is to investigate and discuss the processes in the past and establish if they are applicable to today's environment. Comparisons will be made between the period of building the complex and the individuals concerned with the situation as it prevails in 2002. It will focus on the issues or impediments perceived in discouraging individuals to take an active leadership role within the community and processes of overcoming them.

The innovations that have given opportunity or impetus to persevere to improve the community will be examined. Outside influences or organisations can contribute greatly to the process of a community developing itself. This project will also investigate the systems that can allow a community to grow and develop over time.

As part of the research undertaken for this report interviews were conducted across a subsection of the Te Akau – Waingaro district. The subsection was focused on two groups

1. Members that played a leading role in leading the community for the construction of the Community Complex. These individuals then went on to positions such as Mayor of a district council and Chairman of a large north Island meat processing company, to name a few. The challenges faced and how they were overcome is concentrated on to provide a comparison to today's situation.
2. Younger members that have achieved a level of success in their farming endeavours. A perspective was gained as to their attitudes and issues regarding taking a leadership role outside the farm gate.

The interviews took the form of several leading questions that a discussion was then based upon. I was seeking individuals' perceptions on the issues rather than absolute answers.

It is only when we can gain a relative view of each groups position at a particular stage of their development that initiatives can be developed to overcome any perceived barriers to turning "community wealth into community health"

4 Issues/Solutions

As this report progresses it will deal with the issues faced and discuss possible solutions. These will not be in order of priority as all are strongly linked to each other.

- Large first Hurdle

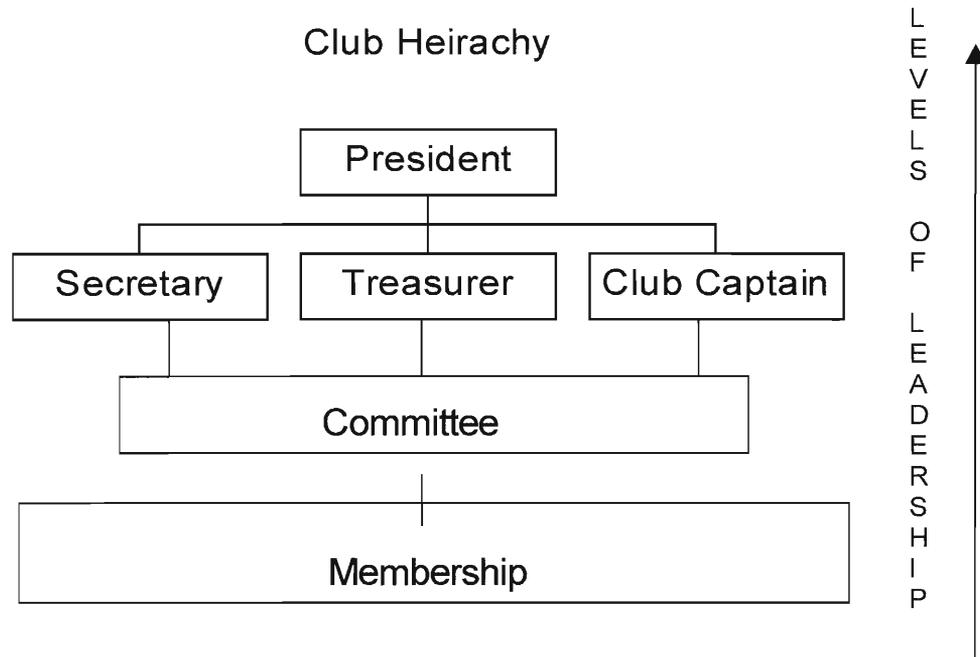
Interview responses

The group comprising the older generation never saw this as an issue as each expanded position they took on was only slightly greater than the one before. However the younger generation took the position that this was a large issue, as the avenues seem to be very narrow to develop their skills.

In the past in rural communities there has been a structured and defined path of succession to leadership roles. These included Federated farmers, Producer Boards and local government. However with the deregulation and restructuring that has occurred since 1984 these organisations have lost their prominence in rural New Zealand. As a result of the demise of this “first step on the path” is perceived by potential candidates be an insurmountable hurdle.

For example when the construction of the Te Akau complex was first mooted the district had two councillors on the Raglan County council. These two came through the path of area delegate, member of the Electoral College, and then into local Government. Now there is not one community member represented on the Waikato District Council and the size of the Ward has tripled in geographical area. For a member of the Te Akau district to be elected to the Whaingaro ward involves a large commitment and a substantial amount of courage. It is a large step to undertake now compared to 30 years ago, especially with no previous grounding in local Government.

In the Te Akau district in the early 1970's there was several strong community organisations such as sport or social clubs. Due to a lack of available or accessible outside diversions these clubs were very prominent in the community. As a result the executive offices of these clubs had a level of "desirability " and respect in the social fabric of Te Akau. It must be noted that the responsibilities were no different than that of the existing clubs today.



However a large majority of these organized organizations now struggle for members and the desire to aspire to these positions of responsibility have diminished. It is now not perceived as being successful to lead these organizations /Clubs.

There is one notable exception in School boards. There is an accepted train of thought that the Board of Trustees contributes a significant level of leadership in the education of the community's children. This makes these positions desirable to successful farmers and prominent positions often occupied by young achievers. The Education Ministry makes available a level of training, which can aid in future roles as well. This organization in the Te Akau district provides the best opportunity to remove the perception of a barrier that is a large first hurdle.

Even so it has one major fault in that it does not provide an obvious chain of advancement. For today's successful farmers a large motivating factor for achievement is the possibility of expansion. The School Boards do not communicate this aspect to potential leaders. It may not exist, but it needs the community and other stakeholders to develop a strategy that can offer opportunities beyond the local School catchment. These opportunities may include roles within local government or funding agencies.

Local government offers perhaps the best solution to this issue of a large first step. As stated earlier the role of local councilor can appear to be daunting due to the size of the electorate. However in other rural areas such as the Wanganui District Council, and even within the boundaries of the Waikato District Council local community boards have been successful. These offer opportunities to develop human leadership skills with people that farmers feel familiar and comfortable. It must be stated that it is the obligation of the local council to set up these boards with well-defined areas of duty and responsibility. Therefore the community must demonstrate a need for community board first for it to be formed and run with any chance of success.

- Lack of experience

Interview responses

The older generation saw this a challenge easily overcome as they had varying levels of experience within their group. The perception of the younger generation is that this is a huge unknown and a daunting prospect.

When the idea of building a sizeable community complex in the Te Akau district was first mooted in 1975 no one had experience in a large community funded building project. In fact those men and woman that undertook the task actually had limited experience of leadership within the community. During the initial stages of the project they often faced acrimonious obstacles that tested the fledgling phase of developing the leadership needed to complete the project. Whilst they may now reflect back upon those times with a degree of mirth the personal attacks they endured exposed the lack of experience within the group.

To overcome this several members took on the role of mentoring the less experienced through this stage. This mentoring took the form of encouragement and demonstrations of how to handle the situations faced. This often took the manner of one-on-one coaching that developed skills within the less experienced individuals that came to the fore many years after the event took place.

Today's high achieving young farmers in the Te Akau district have ample experience growing their own personal business but lack in the area of leading a group to achieve a specific aim. This experience can only be gained by participating in environments that require leadership skills. However once they are in those environments, then the encouragement and mentoring can be an important aspect to development of these individuals.

In the Te Akau / Waingaro district the community has an embarrassing riches of successful leaders in the rural society. However they now appear to be stepping back from an involved role in those leadership positions. One of the most important roles may still be ahead of them- to develop the next generation.

First there must be a desire to participate in this process. With the challenges they faced still fresh in their conscious this generation recognize they still have a role to play. However there still remains a need for a framework to be constructed to allow them to mentor these individuals identified successfully.

The former Producer Boards are ideally situated to provide this service. Already the Producer Boards play a role in developing leadership in the rural sector so it would not be viewed as a too large of a departure from its existing role. The Producer Boards also have the network and infrastructure in place to be to assemble groups throughout the country and facilitate the ongoing programme.

In reality the only formal structure needs to be with the mentors as they will be able to identify the individuals within their communities that would benefit from the direction. However the Mentors may need resources to enable them to fully meet the requirements of this role. Responses to interviews suggest that the financial cost would be relatively low as the potential mentors view this role as an

obligation and challenge. They would therefore not expect remuneration and were willing to be involved in rising of finance if required.

Other organizations such as Federated Farmers and Local Government would also perceive the benefits of being involved in such programme. In fact all groups involved in requiring leaders to come from the rural community will receive payback from this type of Scheme operating.

It was interesting to note from interviews conducted that even though individuals had chosen to retire from public positions of leadership their overwhelming desire was still to contribute to their communities. The quality of experience that they could potentially offer may well turn out to be more valuable than the deeds they accomplished while in office.

- Lack of uncommitted time

Interview responses

The older generation could not recall this being an issue but expected it to be an issue with the younger generation. The younger generation felt that spare time should be spent on their own business. Further questioning identified this time would be spent in fulfilling obligations for IRD, RMA, AHB and other marketing/legislation obligations.

It is now widely accepted that today's young families have more demands on their time as a family unit as opposed to 20 years ago. The reasons for this include the availability of transport and relative speed of it, more social activities outside the local district and wider range of events outside the family home. Solving these issues is not the purpose of this discussion paper but suggesting means to enable potential leaders to free up their time is.

It has been identified that in business one of the tasks that occupy a significant amount of time is complying with the legislative regulations. An example of this is the time needed to complete GST returns and comply with OSH legislation. It is not suggested that these be removed, but a system needs to be developed to create "spare time". This will allow successful farmers to feel free to devote time to the community.

An industry has sprung up in New Zealand around the cost of compliance. In the market place at the moment is a host of businesses that are specialized in areas such as OSH and RMA compliance. By harnessing these companies it would free up a significant amount of time for a successful farming business and its operators.

However there is a significant cost associated with this strategy. If the potential leader is to pay for it entirely, interviews have indicated that they would be unlikely to do the job themselves. But it was interesting to note that most respondents actually believed that they would do a substandard job compared to the companies. Therefore the incentive to use outside assistance must be presented in such a way that the benefits would significantly outweigh the cost.

The first strategy would be to reduce the time taken to comply. While it is highly unlikely that this could be achieved at a national level there is opportunities at a local council level. Local Government bylaws can also impact on time taken for administrative tasks. However the present approach is to try and legislate for every possible eventuality so the approach would have to be from the reverse.

An initiative that could be feasible is to reward the individuals that already devote spare time to community enhancement. This reward could take the form of assistance from the local council. Rather than a monetary incentive the council has available to it resources and expertise it could offer. Access to employees of the council could significantly reduce the time taken to comply with local regulations. If presented in the correct way this will free up time for the individuals concerned.

A flaw in this strategy is that it could only reward those already active in leadership roles in the community. Therefore to be successful it needs to be positioned as “carrot” to entice the people that could contribute significantly to the health of the community. The local councils must not succumb to the temptation to make the “stick” i.e. penalties of non-compliance bigger to push people in to this scheme. This would impact negatively on all respondents interviewed and may result in even less community involvement.

This strategy would be the least expensive. Another solution would be to find funds to pay for companies to do the work for successful farmers. A potential source would be from Central government agencies. In the present environment considered opinion is that this is unlikely to succeed.

The lack of time is, however, very much the perception of the individuals. Relating to cases that occurred during the construction of the Te Akau complex it seemed that some of the more “involved” members of the leadership group were perceived to have the least amount of available time. However these individuals felt that time was not an issue, as the role automatically required an abundance of time. Most of these individuals felt that the potential barrier of an inadequate amount of uncommitted time would easily be overcome if the challenge of leadership roles were appealing enough.

- Lack of Team Dynamics/Support groups

Interview responses

The older generation drew heavily upon these resources to overcome the personal issues involved with leadership. Some sources of support surprised them. The younger generation has a substantial amount of trepidation around the issue to the point it was the single largest barrier to taking on a more active leadership role.

A major hurdle to overcome whenever an individual moves into a role of public leadership is the ability to handle criticism and disagreement from others. This was the single largest reason for the young successful farmers not moving into roles in the community. Whilst it may not be possible to halt these actions, a strategy needs to be developed to lessen its impact.

During the initial stages of proposal for the Te Akau Complex there was considerable ill feeling in the district, especially surrounding the levying of a special rate to pay for its construction. This actually culminated in the taking to court the issue by the opposing sides of the argument to have it resolved. It was interesting to note that the complainants could actually be defined by age with the younger group taking the side of raising a rate. This is a great case study in its self of the perceived problem that the district is facing at present.

Obviously with this level of feeling in the late 1970's, there was considerable criticism of those younger members that most stated was very much a discouragement. However the complex was constructed and most of that group then went on to contribute greatly to the local community in other roles. This demonstrates that once this issue is faced and overcome for the first time in an individual's development, then its importance diminishes greatly.

The principal factor in overcoming this hurdle for those individuals was the project itself. The 'prize' was too great to be lost by giving up through discouragement. This group all focused on the eventual outcome so this put into perspective the negative aspects faced at that time. The reality of a constructed building could be at all times at the forefront of their minds, and so was a constant reminder.

However it could well have been different if the goal was not so tangible. If perhaps it was to present a better way of life then the uncooperative aspect may have been overwhelming. In fact several of the group that constructed the complex were actually involved in such processes prior to and during this period. At this time there was intense debate in the Meat and Wool sector regarding issues such as delicensing the meat trade. There was considerable feeling around these issues and several respondents indicated that the personal attacks dissuaded them from pursuing it further.

The district at the moment is faced with the latter situation. At the present time the major issue is a better way of life as opposed to a large project. Therefore we must translate the successes that occurred during the construction of the complex and try to apply it to today's situation.

One constant theme that came through the interviews was the support the group got from secondary organizations, most notably the rural woman of the district.

The moral support far outweighed any tangible help given but was one of the largest factors in its success. Therefore the role of other organizations to overcome this issue of discouragement is important.

One such role that a secondary organization plays in the Te Akau district is the Complex Committee itself. This committee is drawn from the clubs that operate from the complex and is charged with the overseeing of the operation of the Complex building and land. It is charged with seeking funding for capital projects and ensuring the upkeep of the building itself.

It has one other important responsibility in the district. It awards trophies to individuals in the district that has reached a level of achievement in that calendar year. These awards are recognizable in the district and act as encouragement to those individuals.

However these could be expanded to encompass greater recognition. At present it is a relatively low-key presentation. To give it further impetus it could be taken up by the local Council and repeated in other areas. The awarding itself could be done at a public dinner hosted by one of the clubs. This would serve to make the awards more desirable and therefore encouragement for individuals to strive for better.