

SMART SOLUTIONS

Cityscapes

LGNZ launched a major new localism initiative at its annual conference in July. **Patricia Moore** asked four specialists what a more localist approach could mean for our country's cityscapes.

When LGNZ released its *Position Statement on Localism* at its conference in Christchurch, it was calling for an active programme of devolution and decentralisation.

A localist future is one in which communities, working with and through their local and regional councils, will be empowered to make decisions on a much wider range of public policy concerns than now.

It means devolving power away from central government control and towards local democratic structures, consumers and communities.

While localism is a big-picture concept it is readily evidenced in the creation of small local community projects and landscapes. Many examples of this were shared at the conference.

By calling for a shift to localism, local government in this country is part of a global trend towards greater local control over what happens locally. In short, more freedom and flexibility for local bodies and more involvement by citizens.

The concept is by no means new. Switzerland has long been the poster child of localism, or subsidiarity, as it is sometimes known.

And in 2011, the UK government passed a Localism Act with then Prime Minister Cameron saying locally-driven positive change is possible if people are willing to roll up their sleeves and get involved.

But there were also plenty of naysayers. Some claimed localism is all very well for can-do communities blessed with movers and



Brad Coombs, Isthmus Design Studio.



Marc Bailly, Boffa Miskell.

shakers. But they asked where it leaves the more impoverished communities that lack money, confidence and connections.

"Localism," says Brad Coombs, principal at Isthmus Design Studio, "could lead to less of a focus on regionality or nationally-strategic issues such as the provision of key transport or employment infrastructure.

"The local community would have a much stronger voice and outcomes have a finer-grained focus, perhaps even on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis."

Asked about the implications for cityscape specialists whose business it is to work with local authorities, he suggests there may be less influence of national guidance like the Resource Management Act (RMA) or the New Zealand Urban Design Protocol.

Barry Larsen is business development contractor to ASCO,



Freyberg Place, Auckland.

Flying the Flag

When it comes to visual promotion for local businesses, organisations and events – an important aspect of localism – it seems everything old is new again. Street flags are catching the eye in new and innovative ways, says Chris Souness at Nexus Australasia.

“Councils around the world recognise the appeal of colourful, vibrant and eye-catching flags.”

The downside, he says, is that like many other forms of signage, installation can be costly and time-consuming, often involving external contractors, heavy machinery and technical staff. Then there are the costs associated with traffic management and compliance.

Nexus Developments took this on board,



Chris Souness, Nexus Australasia.

he says, and created a simple and more cost-effective system to manage and utilise street flag networks.

Chris says the resulting product, known as FlagTrax, significantly reduces operating costs by enabling street flags to be raised and

lowered from ground level by anyone, anytime.

Lawrence Warrington is from South Waikato District Council – one of many local bodies using the system. “It’s so quick and easy to change a flag, it’s child’s play,” he says. “And we’ve saved time and thousands of contractor dollars.”

And, Chris points out, the benefits of the system go beyond the direct requirements of councils.

“Community groups and non-profits can work with councils to use the FlagTrax sites to promote local community messages or events.”

By flying the flag, he says innovation and tradition come together for councils focused on raising the attractiveness of streetscapes and effectively promoting events, “whilst significantly reducing operating costs”.

suppliers of decorative asphalt pavements. In his view, localism is an opportunity for councils to work with cityscape specialists to bring the best of innovative products and design from around the world to their streetscapes, to create a sense of space.

And, he says, in his experience with Auckland Council, creative urban designers and planners, backed by engineers from the asset management side of council, are leading the way in creating special cityscapes for people and businesses.

“We’re seeing the Auckland Design Office collaborating with private sector experts and new arrivals bringing international experience to our local scene.”

He notes this collaboration between councils and local urban designers is also happening in other regional centres.

“Urban designers, planners and cityscape specialists who are driven to create a sense of place, are changing the dynamic with shared space usage for pedestrians and limiting vehicles. While bringing visual excitement to places, these also drive engagement of residents and communities to actively engage in these new creations.”

But, Barry says, while products such as decorative pavements enhance, beautify and make for more engaged communities, it’s imperative their life-cycle delivers what councils demand in the way of costs and maintenance. “This is something we focus on strongly at ASCO.”

Marc Bailly is urban planner and director at Boffa Miskell’s Wellington office. He says that for communities to maintain viable town centres, and the streetscapes these include, requires transformation into spaces that represent what’s special about the place, and provide experiences that are attractive to both the local community and others.

“With retail no longer a viable leader when it comes to expressing the character of our town centres, as landscape architects, cultural advisers and urban designers we now focus on two key influences.

“One is that we can’t know what’s special about a place like the locals can. The other is that local authorities need to play a facilitating role in managing and shaping the transformation of their towns.”

Marc says local knowledge has seen the river in Masterton, in the Wairarapa, become the thematic driver to design and planning for work on the Masterton Town Centre Strategy.

“*Take me to the river* is the expression of this objective and underpins everything we do. It has cultural, ecological, recreational, economic, development, resilience, and a range of other values and opportunities that will make the town centre truly reflective of its place and community.

“Thus, in the Wairarapa, Martinborough is the wine town; Greytown is the boutique town; and Masterton can be the river town.”

Brad says the nature of community consultation needs to change. “Working with more localised communities could lead to more of a focus on one-on-one conversations.”

However, he says, national and regional guidance is needed to help shape high-quality urban space. “This is currently missing from the RMA.”

Marc adds that transformation requires skills many councils do not have. “It’s no longer enough to put rules in a district plan and leave it to deliver a good outcome.”

So, does the way forward, as he suggests, lie with “the creation of development managers working in transforming places that can shepherd, advocate and negotiate the actions agreed in the strategy for their town”?

And is localism an opportunity to think smaller, not bigger, as Brad advocates? He suggests smaller-scale decision-making processes and teams with a larger number of smaller projects. “The super city model doesn’t translate well to localised decision-making.” **LG**

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