



Media Release

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Community leaders positive on the future of democracy

New Zealand's inaugural conference of residents' associations attracted over 40 organisations on the weekend and sends a strong message to the local government sector: work with us or face the consequences.

Conference convenor Jarrod Coburn says that the unbridled passion – and in some cases frustration and anger – about issues in the local government and community sector took him aback and caused many to comment that “something needs to be done... or else”.

The Residents 2010 Conference – held in parliament's Grand Hall on Saturday – attracted interest from residents' organisations as far away as Auckland and Christchurch. The conference was a collaboration between the Federation of Wellington Progressive and Residents Associations (FWPRA), the Social and Civic Policy Institute (SCPI), and local government watchdog Council Watch.

Coburn, experienced in community engagement on both sides of the fence, says the “or else” could spell bad news for the local government sector and would come in the form of the increasingly vocal network of residents' associations (over 1,500 across the country) turning their backs if the Government continue down their current path of tinkering with Councils.

“We've seen two instances of the National government stepping in to change local government in the past year: the so-called ‘Super City’ in Auckland, and the sacking of the democratically-elected members of Environment Canterbury.

“This Government has indicated without a doubt that they are willing to make some tough decisions when it comes to local democracy. My fear – and this is shared by others – is that we are seeing a major threat to the remaining Councils.

“The sector – through its own incompetence – is giving central government excuse after excuse to cast doubt over its effectiveness. Bizarre as it might sound; it might be residents' associations and like organisations who have to come to their rescue!”

Mr Coburn says that the gathering of nearly 100 community leaders was a milestone in a growing movement toward citizen participation.

“People are becoming less tolerant with public employees now. There is more money around than ever before in our economy, yet Councils are pleading poverty and reducing their services.

“It is time for the local government sector to do some serious reflecting on their future, and whether or not they want the support of the communities they are legally obliged to serve,” says Coburn.

“Many delegates relayed stories of Councils making decisions using a bogus process of ‘consultation’ – basically an expensive way to justify their officer’s choices,” says Coburn, “Well after this weekend let it be known that citizens can also make choices, and have a voice, and have opinions that count with the people who hold sway over their futures!”

The conference delegates agreed to a number of recommendations, which will be communicated to the appropriate agencies and the public at large over the next few weeks. In the meantime work on finding ways to support residents’ associations across the nation will continue by the three organisations.

“Obviously you don’t hold a conference like this and then forget about it the next day,” says Coburn, “for SCPI, FWpra and Council Watch the work has just begun. Already we’re getting calls from other organisations around the country asking how they can be involved in this movement toward stronger local democracy.

“One thing I will say is that we welcome approaches by anyone at any organisation to start a dialogue about improving the lot of residents’ associations in New Zealand. If it is to be done, it will have to be done cooperatively and in the spirit of democracy and equality.”

Jarrold Coburn says that the organisers will contact community leaders in Auckland and Christchurch soon and ask if they would be happy to co-host similar conferences in their areas in 2011.

Full details of the conference, including the proceedings and associated research, will be available soon on www.residents.org.nz.

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