



## Media Release

(for immediate release)

Wellington, NZ

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Friday 16<sup>th</sup> April 2010

### Residents' associations call for closer ties, better communication

*A conference held for residents' associations in Wellington has called for a working party to be formed to discuss how to tackle the increasing rift between local government and communities.*

The conference – organised by the Federation of Wellington Progressive and Residents Associations, the Social and Civic Policy Institute and Council Watch – debated and voted on several recommendations, some of which have sent shockwaves around Councils.

Conference Convenor Jarrod Coburn says there has been a growing unease amongst civil society organisations about the whimsical and flamboyant nature of local government consultation in recent years. He says there are many disaffected people in communities across New Zealand who are crying out for a say in how their area is run.

“Delegates discussed a number of recommendations but two are particularly pertinent: First and foremost is that an independent panel made up equally of community and Council representatives be formed to investigate how to improve relationships between local government and communities.

“Second, that Wellington regional residents' associations facilitate a citizens' forum consisting of all interested citizens in the Wellington Region to enable their voices to be heard on issues of concern including the implications of the amalgamations of Councils.”

Mr Coburn said that the latter recommendation has sent “shockwaves” through local government, with some Council officers questioning the “right” of citizens to convene such a forum. But Jarrod Coburn says that every citizen not only enjoys the right to live in a democracy, they also have a duty to nurture it.

“Ordinary people have taken as much as they can, they are now ready to take back responsibility for what happens in their communities. The problem seems to be in some (but not all) cases local authorities don't want to relinquish their control.

“What Councils don't yet realise – although some are starting to suspect – is that in today's age they are becoming largely irrelevant. Councils waste millions of dollars each year on providing services that residents simply don't need: Wellington City Council for example employs over 25 staff in its community engagement section... and for what? They must have one of the worst relationships with their residents in the entire country.



“I say that with sadness in my heart, because I once was proudly a member of that team and know the calibre of the people in it. But good people can’t do ‘good’ within a system that is broken, a culture of “them and us”, and with management and elected officials who don’t seem to care.”

Mr Coburn says he is not in a position to say what will happen as a result of the key recommendations, but they will be discussed at length at a follow-up meeting next week. He says any action must be undertaken in a spirit of openness and transparency and with the blessing of resident’s associations.

“Unfortunately that’s a big job for a group of people who had to raise \$11,000 themselves to run the conference. However we don’t see it as being a barrier to success... just an opportunity to get out there and do some good for the people who keep our democracy safe.”

A list of all seven recommendations can be found on the Residents.org.nz website.

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