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New Zealand's Search for Sustainability

Ideas for California Planning

New Zealand, or Aotearoa to the native Maori, is a small island nation of 4 million people and 47 million sheep, located across the Tasman Sea from Australia. The home of the Kiwi (an endangered bird, a popular fruit, and the friendly people) is about the size of Colorado, although the shape of the north and south islands would approximate the elongated length of California.

Much of New Zealand would remind us of Oregon and the Sierras with their majestic Southern Alps. Overall, New Zealand reminds me of California during the 1950's, before urban sprawl kicked in with a vengeance. As a former British colony, New Zealand had followed the traditional Town and Country Planning model, until the early 1990's when sustainability became a major interest to a wide range of national politicians and officials, planners, and citizens. Unlike the U.S., New Zealand has been very active in attempting to address global issues at both the national and local level, especially since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

New Zealand has been in a continuous mode of land use planning reform, beginning with a major overhaul of its governmental structure in the 1980's. In a spirit of economic liberalization, they reduced 800 governmental units down to about ninety, including dividing the country into fourteen watershed areas for future planning. In 1991, the Resource Management Act (RMA) was enacted as a result of a nationwide debate about how to manage their natural and physical resources, an effort guided by the



Downtown Christchurch. (Photo: P. Wack)

strength of the national government and the charisma of its leadership at the time.

I was in New Zealand on sabbatical to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the RMA in the fall of 2001 and had the opportunity to meet with a wide range of national officials, local planners, and citizens to discuss the success and failures of the RMA. I found that the reactions were mixed, but generally hopeful. For example, the RMA calls for local governments to prepare "district plans", which are equal to our General Plans at the county and city levels. To date, about a third have been certified by the national Ministry of the Environment, a third have been submitted in draft form and are awaiting certification, and the remaining are tied up in the Environment Court awaiting final action; a mixed outcome at best.

However, with only a little over 10 years of collective experience, it is too soon to pass a final judgment on the effectiveness of the RMA at present. In my opinion, the RMA is a grand experiment of environmental policy that



The national government center in Wellington, also known as "beehive". (Photo: P. Wack)



Downtown Christchurch. (Photo: P. Wack)



Avon River. (Photo: P. Wack)



South Island east coast (Photo: P. Wack)

is worthy of more time to mature in order to learn from its mistakes and successes, and to evolve into a model for local planning across the globe.

During my most recent visit to New Zealand in the summer of 2003, I learned that additional reforms were in the works that may aid local governments in promoting good planning practice. Their Local Government Act (LGA) was recently revised to improve local planning through monitoring and reporting of plan implementation. Moreover, local governments were given more power to administer their planning programs, which is a big deal for a government based on a strong national executive branch and not familiar to the California experience. I also discovered through numerous interviews across the country that the LGA reforms were not connected very well to the RMA, generating some confusion about land use planning and environmental factors.

In addition to the promise of the RMA and LGA reforms, New Zealanders were moving forward on the sustainable communities' bandwagon through a unique effort of bridging "quality of life" issues with the growing interest in local community sustainable indicators. During my last visit to Aotearoa ("the land of the long white cloud"), I focused on an effort that I learned about at the end of my previous sabbatical visit in 2001, a collaborative report compiled by six of the nation's largest cities focusing on the state of the quality of life in New Zealand. It was a remarkable effort to assess the well being of a nation with a population becoming increasingly urban while remaining traditionally rural in many respects.

Knowing that a new report was to be released in 2002, I planned my return trip accordingly, expecting that the report would be released in plenty of time to review and prepare for extensive interviews of the participants. As with any major effort though, delays happen. I returned to find that the new report had been expanded to include the eight largest cities representing almost half of the total national population, and that it would not be released until early October, almost a month after I would have to return to Cal Poly to start Fall Quarter classes. Argh!

However, the report was released in late October, and is now available on the web site www.bigcities.govt.nz. The major benefit of this effort has been the improved relationship between the national government and local cities in working

toward the goal of improving the urban environment of New Zealand, which is undetectable by the typical tourist's radar emphasizing outdoor recreation, green landscapes with grazing animals, quaint vineyards, beautiful mountain and rivers retreats, and sites where Lord of the Rings was filmed. New Zealanders, however, are very concerned about the future of their cities and are seeking ways to address well known urban issues that are mostly ignored. They understand that in order to achieve a good quality of life and a sustainable society, the issues confronting their urban communities must be addressed.

My work in New Zealand has informed my teaching at Cal Poly. As a founding member of the "Sustainability Movement" in the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, I have been able to include New Zealand's efforts as positive examples in my lectures on green plans and sustainable communities in our popular EDES 406 course. In my CRP 336 course also, we have devoted the last two years developing a web site to promote the use of community sustainable indicators for application at both the community and campus levels in San Luis Obispo County.

The possibilities for studying planning in the international context are limitless. I am excited to see that my goal of generating a long-term New Zealand exchange program to encourage student interaction between our nations is starting to take shape. In the summer of 2004, a group of planning students from the University of Auckland will be visiting the Central Coast, and three CRP majors are currently attempting to be the first wave of students to attend the University of Auckland this fall. I have also been working with Lincoln University, near Christchurch, to establish a student exchange program. It is very important that our students understand that we are a part of a larger community of nations and people, which I deem critical to the future sustainability of our nation



*View of Downtown Auckland.
(Photo: P. Wack)*



*Downtown Christchurch.
(Photo: P. Wack)*