

Plan Change 29 - Mike Ward

When I first became a politician. I think it was get my hands on the rule book. It took just one term sitting through many hearings under the old Town and Country Planning act to realise, that while the rules may have stopped some dreadful things from happening, they were a recipe for mediocrity. Too often applicants put their imaginations on hold, and did no more than they had to, to get their projects across the line. The result? A less than inspiring built environment… and a community at odds with Council.

I had some hope for the Resource Management Act. The idea of being allowed to do whatever we wanted to do, however, we wanted to do it, provided we managed to avoid remedy or mitigate the untoward environmental / social consequences, had appeal… but while preventing dreadful things from happening may be, admirable it is neither as effective or as enjoyable as enabling and encouraging brilliant things to happen.

Plan change 29 is one approach to increasing housing supply, and apartment living is likely to be part of any future mix, but as with any proposal I ask how well does this proposal respond to the “To what end “ question?

If the “ To what end” question is simply to increase the supply, apartments probably tick the box. Supply and affordability are certainly important issues, but housing is also an aesthetic, lifestyle, health, community building, transport, energy, economic, and, perhaps above all, a sustainability issue.

In communities where vastly too many of us are already depressed and anxious, on a planet that may already be planning to shrug us off, there is little that we do, that does not need to change, and where, and how, we choose to build and live is one of the greatest determinants of sustainability, enviable lifestyles, well being… and happiness.

Asking Council to go back to the community for a more comprehensive answer to the " to what end " question, may well be beyond your brief, but I include the following extract from Lush Green, my, "how to look after the planet and ourselves, and have a lovely time doing it," book, as on example, not just of what our future might look like, if we were serious about being here for the long haul, but also some thoughts on what it might take to make it happen.

During my last term as a Nelson City councillor, Mayor Rachel Reese asked me to write a housing strategy for the city. I tried to shift the conversation by writing my strategy as though it had already been implemented, imagining how our lives changed as a consequence. I wrote:

What had begun as a novel, if ambitious, sustainability strategy, had been embraced and developed by successive councils and enthusiastic councillors, into what, historians credited, with being the beginning of "the transformation" or "the turnaround." In the space of a handful of years, Nelson – first the city, but very soon the entire region –became a most beautiful, extraordinarily prosperous, and perhaps most surprisingly, a most inclusive, lifestyle and sustainability mecca.

Blessed with what planners said were, "good bones", plus an enviable climate, and a population that embraced innovation,– Nelson's CBD with its lush, tree-canopied streets, proliferation of flower baskets, on-street dining, and murals, banners and buskers – had, by the end of the 20th century, already become one of the country's most beautiful cities.

Its further transformation had been community-driven. The CBD came alive day and night as property developers, entrepreneurs and individuals, took advantage of enlightened council policies designed, initially, to increase the appeal of inner-city living.

The decision to reverse a long-standing (and outmoded) ban on veranda posts, facilitated the occupation of a succession of first- and second-floor verandas, initially as outdoor living spaces, but subsequently as shared first- and second-floor walkways, connected by stairs and lifts to the pavement below. Unused and underused upstairs office and air space was converted to stylish apartment and lifestyle accommodation, as well as enhanced commercial opportunities.

Central city and city-fringe living spread to occupy air space above ground-floor parking. Single-story developments became a thing of the past. Laneways were transformed with a combination of residential and small-scale commercial developments designed to meet the needs of discerning shoppers, and inner-city and city-fringe dwellers.

While the positive impact on lifestyle and central city businesses had been predicted, the speed, and extent to which the community embraced the new opportunities, and the dramatic decline in late-night and early-morning antisocial behaviour surprised even the most optimistic. Nelsonians and visitors flooded into “the friendliest little city in the Pacific”, to experience the lively nightlife and innovative boutique shopping experiences.

Initiatives in the CBD were complemented by equally enlightened developments in the suburbs. Developers and home owners took advantage of an extraordinarily aspirational plan to accommodate, not just a growing population, but a growth in demand for separate dwellings within existing developments, as household sizes plummeted in response: to an ageing population; And the increase in child-free couples and individuals choosing to, or finding themselves, living alone.

The City’s previous plan had aspired to similar outcomes, but relied largely, (and as it transpired, too often unsuccessfully), on regulation. The new plan was driven by vision. (Rules were few and largely enshrined the accepted culture).

The plan elaborated on an aspirational and inspirational vision, with illustrations and descriptions of some of the more imaginative solutions, and an emphasis on incentives and education. Hidden infill became the norm as an imaginative, and dramatically less risk-averse council, collaborated with home owners and property developers to reconfigure many, under-occupied, existing homes and spaces into additional dwellings.

In addition to accommodating the burgeoning number of smaller households, provision was made for a range of home occupations: neighbourhood cafes, neighbourhood-focussed elder and childcare, and an assortment of business initiatives, designed primarily, to meet “the village” needs.

Large-scale apartment blocks came to nothing as new, higher-density dwellings, focussed on comprehensive developments that rarely went beyond three floors, featuring setbacks, decks on the upper floors, and beautifully designed shared spaces, as well as easily-managed, compact and attractive, private decks and courtyards.

Threats of sea level rise became an opportunity to rethink and redevelop low-lying coastal suburbs. Measures to mitigate the impact of increasing, but still infrequent 20- and 50-year floods, by flood-proofing ground floors (or making ground-floor activities floodable with raised wiring, liftable carpets and concrete construction of ground-floor walls and floors), combined

with mixed use developments, and increased housing densities, justified the eventual cost of installing pumps and bunding of riverbank and coast to minimise the risk of future flooding.

The demand for smaller dwellings, which began in response to declining home ownership and the issues of supply and affordability, quickly broadened to accommodate the needs of lifestylers, as home owners and the real estate industry recognised the appeal of smaller, attractive and more manageable dwellings.

Living in smaller homes within walking distance of the places home owners wanted to be, gained momentum, as folk realised they preferred riding their mountain bikes and reading, to mowing lawns and commuting. Employment moved into the suburbs, with the pub/corner store/ cafés popping up to meet the needs of folk choosing to work from home.

It took visitors to the city, (and many came just to check out the changes and discover what it took to transform a city), to remind Nelsonians how different their lives had become. Many were choosing to work fewer hours. Incomes had risen, and unemployment virtually disappeared.

A community, that had long had a reputation for creativity, had become creatively different. Outdoor dining and space for on-street displays were the catalyst for businesses and individuals to “own” and occupy their shared spaces.

Neighbourhood cafes, street art, and orchards and edible plantings, and harvesting in the streets and lanes, brought life to suburbia, as a culture of “walking out”, or “promenading” in their own neighbourhoods, caught on. Traffic slowed as plantings blurred the boundary between carriageway, footpath, and front section. Ordinary became an anathema as council’s heritage initiatives saw home owners take advantage of advice and incentives around intensification, colour schemes, fencing, furnishing and landscape, to transform otherwise quite unremarkable homes and neighbourhoods.

The key to Nelson’s transformation had been the community’s eagerness to embrace partnerships, and the notion of inclusiveness, as enthusiasm for acknowledging and applauding innovation, wherever it occurred, replaced a previous focus on problems and shortcomings.

A repeat of the resolve that had enabled the Nelson City Council’s Clean Heat, Warm Homes partnership to spawn a whole new industry and make every Nelson home warm, dry, and healthy, now focussed on making neighbourhoods safer and more beautiful. Simple initiatives like a basketball hoop in every cul-de-sac, school and neighbourhood gardens and nutrition

initiatives , and the plethora of active transport options, had a profound effect on the city's health and deprivation statistics.

Paradoxically, it had been the comprehensive developments that drove the home gardening revolution. Lifestylers and apartment-dwellers, freed from the demands of lawn and section, discovered they had the time to transform courtyard, deck and veranda into attractive gardens, even producing a modest abundance of, container grown, herb, veg and berry. As well, the early morning and evening outings, to walk, weed and prune, or forage for, fig, feijoa, plum, strawberry and olive, in community orchard and garden, provided opportunities to meet, hitherto unseen, and unknown neighbours.

The transformation, was also the incubator for an economy, much less prone to the vagaries of international markets. Previously marginal enterprises were revitalised as locals looked to locals when dining out, and sourcing their gardening, food, and home help requirements, as well as a host of previously unimagined services…

Here endeth the housing strategy

And the last portion of my housing chapter…

It is 10 years since my lovely old home turned 100, and it is 47 years since my family travelled to Nelson and spent seven days looking for, deciding to buy it, and make the purchase. My house is now more than my son, and I need, (So we invited a young musician and her son to occupy out two spare bedrooms), but that house has been a large part of my good fortune. It was built when motor cars were rare, and long before many families aspired to own one. It has no off-street parking and a flight of steps from the street to the house. Our grapevine, and self-seeded plum trees are lush. The pigeon wood, cabbage tree and the Pseudopanax that came home on the back of my bike, are huge… and home to an abundance of bird and insect life.

Until my children grew up and moved out, my lovely old bungalow, on its 1/8th acre section, with its chickens and garden, served us very well. I have worked from home for most of the last 46 years, running my jewellery cart to town in seven or eight minutes, and cycling to meetings in three or four. Because I resisted the temptation to sell and trade up, I became part of my community and contributed to our request for heritage status… and inflation took care of the mortgage, leaving me with the time for playing, parenting and the politics as well as the creating and the adventures. Sunday outings were frequently no more ambitious than a five-minute walk

to Nelson Haven. The Custom House Hotel was around the corner, Auckland Point School just five minutes away. The dairy, 30 seconds.

It would be tempting to claim that we knew about the advantages of living close to town when we purchased Number 10 Russell Street, but I suspect we chose to live there because we loved its high ceilings and ornate fire places, but being close to the places we most needed to be, with an attractive roof over our heads, in an interesting neighbourhood, without debt, has been no bad thing… and we should aspire to no less, for everyone choosing to make this lovely city home.

Mike Ward