

## Notes from the Inaugural Meeting of The BOI WatchDogs

29 July, 2017, The Duke Tavern, Russell

Welcome to all members of the BOI WatchDogs who were present. Most were residents of Russell and immediate surrounding areas/towns/communities.

### 1. FNDC Bylaw and Dog Policy Review

Discussion was held on issues arising from the Far North District Council (FNDC) proposed dog control bylaw and dog policy, covering memo/report by Neil Mitchell dated 12.6.17, and attachments. Key areas of concern included:

#### 1.1 Consultation process

In summary - people raised multiple issues around the consultation process, and concern about the FNDC's apparent unwillingness to listen to community views even when they were provided.

- **22 registered dog owners at the meeting had not received a questionnaire from the FNDC.**
- **Many residents had not heard of the FNDC bylaw review/consultation prior to** just over a week ago, when we received an email from friends of friends who had attended the most recent Strategy Committee meeting.
- With 40 people being prepared to come to community meeting in one FNDC town – Russell - which was only called for a week ago, **there is clearly strong community interest in this issue.** There are now over 400 members of the BOI WatchDogs facebook page, also launched less than one week ago. This high interest points up the fact that the consultation process did not reach those who were concerned about, and affected by, this policy and bylaw review.
- **Discussion about why the FNDC consultation had failed so resoundingly.** Some comments included: queries about why we didn't get the questionnaire; the questionnaire seems very dog unfriendly and biased towards particular outcomes; the complexity of the online map which many found impossible to read online/understand; the lack of consultation with people who are not engaged online; the fact that the Council dismissed low turnout to meetings, or non-return of questionnaires, as being a sign of disinterest rather than a sign of poor consultation mechanisms; some online maps unable to be viewed properly so we couldn't work out proposed zoning; locals need to be contacted through a range of mechanisms (papers, word of mouth, meetings, social media, noticeboards); mistrust of FNDC staff, and; fear of bringing unwanted attention from FNDC staff by attending consultations or putting your name on a questionnaire.
- **Strong concern that the final council documents dismissed feedback from their own consultation process,** so that even when people's views were raised in writing or at meetings, solutions were not found for their concerns, and their views were not genuinely heard. For example, see comments in Neil Mitchell's document about the petition from 599 people regarding access to Paihia and Waitangi beaches. Rather than this being seen as indicative of community wishes and genuine need, it was referred to only as a "case example" of community ignorance about the reasons for restrictions on dogs (that is, the author's beliefs about the needs and rights of nesting shorebirds).
- **Concern about future review/consultation.** There was fear expressed that while we have received two informal notifications from FNDC that the current bylaw will not be going to Council in its current form, that FNDC may choose to simply redraft the bylaw and policy and submit that to Council, without genuine consultation and further discussion with residents.

This would not allay our concerns or even begin to resolve the mistrust that has been developing between FNDC staff, environmentalists, dog owners, and other residents.

## **1.2 Overall negative, anti-dog/dog owner flavour of the bylaws, policy and covering document**

There was general concern that the FNDC documents reflected a view that the rights of native wildlife were greater than the rights of (resident) humans and their pets. There is no mention in any documentation of the health benefits of pet ownership, the economic benefits of dog-friendly towns and zoning, and reduced health care costs of pet owners etc. Dogs are our personal trainers in many instances and a critical part of many residents and visitors lives. Many of our towns are reliant on visitors who are also dog lovers. This does not appear to have been recognised, acknowledged, or heard.

## **1.3 Lack of Off-Leash Walking Areas**

This is a key issue. Residents are frustrated that in order to run their dogs off-leash, they need to do so on private land. This seems ludicrous, and out of step with progressive areas (examples raised were Nelson/Golden Bay, and Wellington) which provide parks and beach zones/times for off leash dog access, poo bags and bins. Dogs are pack animals and need to learn to socialise to be healthy, happy and safe. The lack of FNDC approved off-leash areas seems to contradict not only residents' needs and views, but also legislation which requires that dog owners exercise their dogs appropriately. Discussion was held on various local beaches and parks. Reserves often seem to only be used by dog walkers in some instances, anyway. Rolands Wood is muddy and steep and not suitable for elderly residents. Dog owners don't want to have to walk their dogs in the dark, and they want to have choices. Why isn't public/government land provided for this purpose? The proposed provision of only one beach – Opua – for off-leash access in the entire Bay of Islands is seen as absurd, given the number of dogs and owners, and the size of that beach. The east end of Long Beach has long been an off-leash exercise area for Russell residents with the approval of the land owner with riparian rights. The land was sold recently and a formal consent was required by the OIA and given by the buyer to provide access for off-leash exercise above the high tide mark. The Council has attempted to remove this right without any consultation with our community. More information is needed to be able to discuss and consult about particular areas.

**1.4 Number of dogs per household** – people expressed strong views about the fact that the FNDC believes it is “ideal” that there be NO dogs at all on Russell Peninsula (see P8, Neil Mitchell document of 12.6.17). Ideal for whom? Who believes this is ideal? The arrogance of this statement in the FNDC document was not appreciated, although ironically it did galvanize our community into action! There was no acceptance of this statement at our meeting. Further discussion is needed on why some regions in NZ have a three-dog policy but ours is limited to two. Strong concern that the FNDC seems focussed on making Russell some kind of native bird sanctuary without resident approval or input, given that this statement just “appeared out of the blue” in this document, as if it was generally accepted. It is not.

**1.5 Over-reaction in suggestion of muzzling of dogs tied up outside shops etc** – discussion on this, with differing views to what is being proposed by FNDC. Blanket muzzling of dogs outside shops is seen as a complete over-reaction. For further investigation.

**1.6 Need for research based approach, including unbiased, well challenged research on pets, humans, and native wildlife.** The effectiveness of the Kiwi Aversion Training for certain breeds of dogs and pets was questioned, and we would like the research on this. Information on the level of threats that dogs have posed to local bird life (particularly kiwi), as stated in the Council documents,

seems to contradict some information on the DOC website and in various research papers (which are being analysed by members). Where evidence contradicts pro-bird environmental bias, for example in the case after several years of experience from locals in Tauranga Bay, FNDC does not appear to listen to that evidence but instead dismisses it. The experience of locals in Russell in terms of dogs and their impact on birdlife, over decades, does not seem to have been genuinely considered by FNDC.

#### AGREED ACTION:

It was agreed that we would write to FNDC to request that:

- We and FNDC residents receive formal, written notification that the current draft FNDC Dog Control Bylaw and Dog Policy will not be implemented.
- FNDC now undertakes a better consultation process.
- The review aims for a Bylaw and Policy which is positive, and represents the interest of residents, dogs, and wildlife in a more balanced way.

## **2.0 Additional FNDC Related Issues**

In summary - there were a range of issues raised about the FNDC and dogs which are also of concern to residents. They included:

- **Perception that FNDC is being driven by conservationists within Council and conservationist lobby groups** rather than all FNDC residents.
- **There is a lack of confidence that our Council is representing, and defending, our views and needs as residents.**
- **Implementation/operation of bylaws and policy** – questions were raised about the fairness of the manner in which even the current 2006 dog control bylaw is being implemented. For example, whether priority was being given to dogs that were being aggressive towards humans, versus dogs that were suspected bird eaters. The means of monitoring the implementation of this policy was discussed – how many calls are received, from whom? What districts or towns receive the most attention, for what reasons? What is the policy when a dog is found which is micro-chipped and/or has dog tags – why are those dogs being taken to the pound when their owners could simply have been called? There is a perception of bias, and mistrust between dog owners and FNDC staff. This perception can potentially be calmed/clarified, but only with facts and audit/monitoring, not with verbal ‘reassurance’.
- **Low quality of the pound, and killing of stray dogs** – there is fear and anger about the policy which appears to be that lost dogs are being killed within days of entering the pound (several people said that there was a 9-day period before being killed). There is also a concern about the quality of the Kaitaia pound, and the distance from many residents. This leads to a perception that FNDC is acting with unkindness towards dogs, and therefore residents who own dogs.
- **Lost dogs** – there is fear among residents that we cannot share photos of lost dogs without calling attention to this with FNDC staff, and thus risking that dog’s life if it is impounded. Discussion was held on kinder, safer ways to try to find a dog’s owner without involving FNDC attention, time or resources.
- **Microchip use** and readers at FNDC – discussion about whether they have such readers, and in what manner they are being used.
- **FNDC zoning of land to exclude pets** – there was concern that, given the perception of FNDC priority of bird rights over human and dog rights, that this ‘flavour’ could be affecting zoning

of private and/or public land. Discussion was held and it was apparent that residents were not aware of the extent to which covenants are being placed on land which, if the FNDC chose to act, would mean that they could not have a pet dog. There was confusion over 'urban coastal' vs 'urban' zoning. It was agreed to begin to look into this. Members with real estate, legal, town planning etc experience are asked to contact the organising committee so we can learn more about this, so we know the facts before we act.

- **Sign upon entering Russell township** – rather than a sign welcoming people to our town, there is a very large sign stating “ANY DOG CAN KILL KIWI”. General agreement that this is negative and unfriendly, at best. Agreed to investigate the legal status of this sign, and to recommend that it be replaced with a “Welcome to Russell/Kororareka” type of sign.

### 3.0 The BOI WatchDogs Group

Discussion was held on the group's structure, aims, and actions.

- **Group focus** – our focus at present is to ensure that the draft bylaws and dog policy are not implemented, to ensure future genuine consultation from FNDC, and to ensure that a new policy - which is fair and represents the interests of dogs, humans and wildlife - is developed. Other issues need to be put aside while we solve this problem. There is energy for some great, fun, important projects in the future if we want to continue beyond this lobbying issue.
- **Discussed coverage** and whether the group should provide a voice for residents of Russell, BOI, or Northland. Agreed that we want to provide a vehicle for representation across all areas covered by FNDC, and that we would thus broaden our scope, and seek to link with other groups in other towns.
- **Coordinating group** - there is a group of residents working together daily on these issues, and on the formation of the group. This Coordinating Group will form the “executive” in the short term, to provide a team which can focus on these urgent FNDC matters. Part of the Coordinating Group's role will be to develop a structure and voting system so we can vote for long term committee members once we get established.
- **Group name** – concerns about confusion about our group's name, The BOI WatchDogs, has occurred. Within days of our establishment on Facebook, a group of conservationists developed a 'rival' Facebook page copying our name, calling itself The BOI Dogwatch.
- **Membership and consultation** – we want to consult with as many dog owners/lovers as possible. Discussion over how best to do this, including linking with other regional groups, utilising a variety of social media outlets (community noticeboards, facebook groups etc), community email chains, local newspapers, notices in shop windows. We also need to try to get input somehow from 'hidden' dog owners, e.g. those with unregistered dogs, and/or those fearful of involvement due to fear of Council attention. We are all residents, whether considered by FNDC staff to be “Responsible Dog Owners” or not.
- **Website** – Joshua Kosmala-George, from Northland Technology, is kindly going to develop a website for us voluntarily. He is working on it immediately, alongside Alan Wilkinson and Debbie Hinton. This should solve a multitude of limitations we have with the Facebook group page, including the problem when important posts “roll off the screen” and seem to get lost. THANKS JOSH!
- **Media involvement** – discussion on the importance of local press in alerting people to issues, encouraging membership, and encouraging residents to keep FNDC honest and genuinely representing residents' interests.
- **Social activism** options were discussed.

## ACTIONS

Members – please contact us to advise how you can help, and what areas you are interested in or have skills to help out.

### **4.0 Contact people:**

Please contact the Co-ordinating Group via our Facebook page, until the website and email addresses are established.

Leonie Exel, Co-ordinator; Coordinating Group Members - Alan Wilkinson, Kate Burdekin, Debbie Hinton.

Meeting closed at around 4.45pm

Thanks to the Duke Tavern for the quiet area, the good beer, and for playing “Who Let the Dogs Out” after the meeting closed!