

2. Issues Overview

The Western Bay of Plenty sub-region's environment possesses a warm climate with popular beaches and a harbour safe for swimming and boating. The highly productive coastal margins are ideal for agriculture and horticulture while the rural lowlands and rolling hills are framed by the backdrop of the Kaimai Ranges which have ecological significance.

The sub-region has been an area of rapid population growth since the 1950's and it is predicted that the Bay of Plenty will become the fourth or fifth most populated region in New Zealand by the year 2051.

As this rapid population increase is predicted to continue, it is important to ensure that future development is planned in an efficient and effective way. Such planning will mean the sub-region continues to be a desirable place in which to live, while also providing for the economic growth necessary to support the increasing population.

As the sub-region's population grows, the current household structure and demographic profile are also changing. It is predicted that by the year 2051 there will have been a seven fold increase in the number of residents over 80 years of age. There are also likely to be three times as many single and two person households and twice as many traditional families.

To meet the diverse and changing needs of the community a range of choices for types and locations of residential development will be required. There will also need to be an increase in the amount of business and rural land to support these communities. In addition, there will be a greater need for effective transportation links, more community, cultural and educational facilities and more health care services.

Public transport as well as walkways and cycleways are seen as vital to meet the transportation needs of the sub-region's growing population. Corridors will be necessary to integrate transport networks with key land uses and to provide greater efficiency for business land, intensified housing nodes and the hospital. As well as the roading corridors that link with adjacent regions, there are also the rail corridor and the Port of Tauranga.

To address the above issues, the three local authorities having statutory resource management responsibilities within the sub-region, being the Bay of Plenty Regional Council, Tauranga City Council and Western Bay of Plenty District Council, have adopted a joint 50 year growth management strategy and implementation plan. This is known as the SmartGrowth Strategy and consists of a partnership and collaboration between the three Councils, tangata whenua and community groups.

The SmartGrowth Strategy itself has limited statutory effect – its findings need to be implemented through the various regional and territorial authority statutory planning documents prepared under the RMA. The overriding "high level" RMA planning document is the Bay of Plenty Regional Policy Statement (the RPS) prepared by the Regional Council. The RPS contains a growth management strategy designed to anchor land use patterns and set development targets (including minimum residential densities) for the western Bay of Plenty sub-region.

One of the main aims of SmartGrowth is to ensure that as the western Bay of Plenty sub-region grows, it continues to be a desirable place in which to “live, work and play”. This live/work/play principle emphasises the need for a more compact approach to land use planning so as to limit the “urban sprawl” which has characterised past development.

The growth management strategy within the RPS incorporates the recommended SmartGrowth sub-regional settlement pattern which identifies areas for future urban development and sets defined urban limits for such growth based on growth projections. This will ensure growth is provided for but does not spread outside of the set urban limit lines for each of the existing townships. Within these areas employment nodes and key transport corridors have been identified to ensure they are protected as growth occurs. Within the Western Bay of Plenty District, it is proposed to confine development of an urban nature to within or immediately adjoining the existing urban areas of Waihi Beach, Katikati, Omokoroa and Te Puke.

Some areas within these urban centres will be set aside for more intensive development. These areas will need to be located close to amenities and to employment opportunities to enable residents to live in close proximity to their place of work.

A critical part of SmartGrowth is looking ahead to long term infrastructure needs and the identification of principal transport corridors. Such corridors provide important links to settlement areas as well as ensure unimpeded access to the Port of Tauranga and to other regions. Growth is proposed to be staged in a manner which ensures efficient utilisation of infrastructure.

Urban design plays an important part in ensuring any new development is carried out in a way which creates safe and vibrant communities that are easy to get around in by foot, bicycle and motor vehicle.

Limiting urban growth to within defined areas will result in positive effects on the rural environment which makes up most of the Western Bay of Plenty District. As the District is predominantly rural, protection of the values and resources existing within the rural environment is essential.

Currently 10% of the sub-region’s population is employed in the agriculture industry. This is well above the national average of 7.5%. In addition to this, the sub-region’s most important export industry is agriculture (including horticulture).

As primary production is the main economic base of the sub-region there is a need to ensure that productive rural land is not unnecessarily fragmented through subdivision driven by lifestyle demand rather than that for primary production. Urban expansion into rural areas can also have negative effects on infrastructure, create increased transportation costs and result in a reduction in rural amenity values.

In the past the rural environment has been predominantly a working one, with most people who lived in that environment also working there. In recent years, liberal rural subdivision rules have enabled many people who are attracted to the amenity values prevailing in the rural environment to live in rural areas whilst continuing to rely on nearby urban areas as their principal place of employment. This has often been to the detriment of the use of the versatile soils found in many rural areas for primary productive purposes.

The high quality versatile soils found in parts of the sub-region are a scarce and finite resource. With increasing population these fertile soils need to be protected so as to ensure their use for food production now and into the future. Continued rural subdivision driven by lifestyle demand has the potential to compromise the availability of these soils for productive use, particularly where the new rural lots being created are less than 4ha in area.

The sub-region is also home to a significant Maori population which is continuing to grow as more Maori return home to their ancestral lands. The Tauranga Moana region is the ancestral home to five iwi (Ngaiterangi, Ngati Ranginui, Ngati Pukenga, Hauraki and Te Arawa) and approximately 26 hapu. Since 2001 the Maori population has increased by approximately 12.8%. It is therefore appropriate that provision is made for Papakainga housing on multiple-owned Maori land so as to accommodate some of this growth.