

ENGAGING FOR SUCCESS TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS FOR SMALL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Our highly valued small communities are struggling to survive as local stores and services close, local employment decreases and significant travel is required to access basic necessities. Small community's need a basic mobility solution that is not a pared down city bus service but a transport outcome they have designed and 'own'.

This technical note looks at three small New Zealand communities, that the author has been involved with, and their approach to the provision of public transport services.

Mangakino, a small town of 1,100 people in the centre of the North Island, has a thrice weekly service to a larger neighbouring town that has been running for five years.

South Mercury Bay, on the Coromandel Peninsula in the North Island, has summer visitor traffic headaches solved by a transport solution the residents actively manage.

The local people of Matura in the South Island, pop. 1,300, need access to a larger neighbouring town for basic necessities. The population is ageing and the town is slowly shrinking. Their public transport journey has just begun, but they are taking the community with them.

This note will show that small communities must own their bus service if it is to be a successful transport solution for them.

Introduction

In New Zealand, society is concerned about the plight of small communities. They are witnessing smaller towns getting smaller and bigger towns getting bigger. The question of need for maintaining small communities is not a palatable political discussion, therefore solutions to the short term problem, such as access to transport, have been identified as an avenue to explore.

But what is causing this decline in small communities? Examination of our population statistics show one significant possible cause, our population is ageing. Whilst the ability of our senior population members (typically those aged over 65) to travel independently has always been more limited than others, their greater representation as a proportion of total population is leading to a shift of thinking by councils on how they provide travel options to their communities.

Another causal factor in the decline in population of our smaller communities is the centralisation of government services and the impact of larger format stores on smaller community stores. Both of these impacts have led to a greater need to travel to larger centres on a regular basis. Without the means to travel, councils, based on strong anecdotal evidence, acknowledge that it is difficult for many ageing residents to remain living in these small communities.

Councils have therefore reasoned that if small communities are to retain their ageing population, they need to become well connected to their bigger neighbours by more than just provision of a road. Alternative transportation options to the private car will be needed to ensure long term liveability in our community for our ageing population.

And finally, some communities have a very different problem - how to manage large volumes of seasonal traffic. As the traffic affects their daily life and their businesses, the community wants to be part of the solution.

This paper looks at three small New Zealand communities and their approach to the provision of alternative transport services.

Mangakino, a small town of 1,100 people in the centre of the North Island, has a thrice weekly bus service to a larger neighbouring town, Tokoroa, which has been running for five years.

South Mercury Bay, on the Coromandel Peninsula in the North Island, has two summer visitor traffic issues that have been addressed by a transport solution the community supports.

The residents of Matakura in the South Island, population 1,300, need access to a larger neighbouring town for access to basic necessities. The population is ageing and the town is decreasing in size. Their access issues have been identified and they are now looking at what mobility option is best for them.

The case studies

Mangakino

Mangakino is a small town in the centre of the north island of New Zealand. It lies on the banks of the Waikato River and has a population of 1,257 (2006 NZ Census).

The town is a ward of the Taupo District Council and falls within the boundary of the Waikato Regional Council (Environment Waikato).

The town supports a doctor's surgery, ambulance and fire station, postal centre, convenience store, preschool, primary and a high school.

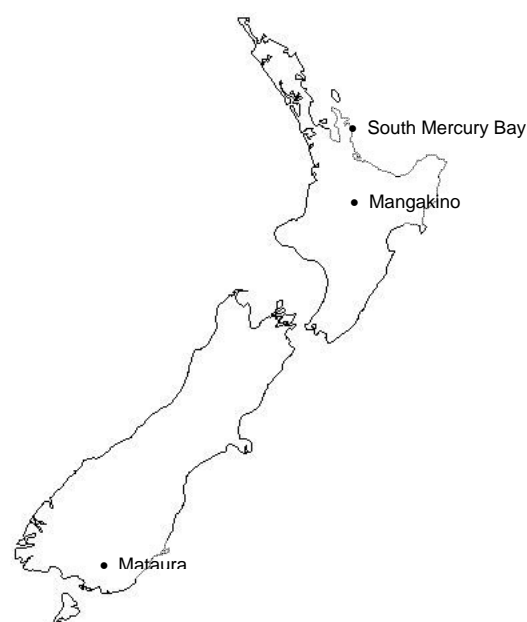


Figure 1 Study locations

The closest larger town is Tokoroa, some 24 kms north of Mangakino with a population of 15,063 people. Tokoroa is a 'full service' town with major government social departments represented, hospital, shopping centre, tertiary education providers and council office. It is also the location of the main office of the South Waikato District Council.

Mataura

Mataura is situated on the Mataura River on the eastern fringe of the Southland Plain. The South Island Main Trunk railway and State Highway 1 pass through Mataura, which is 12 kilometres south-west of Gore and 52 kilometres north-east of Invercargill. The 2008 Department of Statistics estimate for Mataura was 1,540 residents.

The town is a ward of Gore District Council and falls within the boundary of Southland Regional Council.

The closest larger town is Gore, 12 kms north of Mataura with a population of 12,108. It is a 'full service' town with major government social departments represented, hospital, shopping centre and tertiary education providers. It is also the location of the main office of the Gore District Council.

South Mercury Bay

South Mercury Bay is made up of the communities of Cooks Beach, Hahei and Hot Water Beach, on the eastern seaboard of the Coromandel Peninsula in the North Island of New Zealand.

The two main towns, Cooks Beach and Hahei have a combined resident population of 851.

Both towns have limited services, mainly convenience stores.

The closest town of any size is Whitianga, population 3,768 (2006 NZ Census), and is approximately 40-43 kms (40 minutes driving time) north of Cooks Beach and Hahei. Alternatively travel can be via road to Ferry Landing (4 kms from Cooks, 14 from Hahei) and a short ferry ride (5 minutes) can be taken to Whitianga.

Issues addressed by transport planning

Each community faced a transport issue. Mangakino and Mataura have a proportionally older and younger community (compared to the New Zealand average) and a higher number of households without access to a motor vehicle. South Mercury Bay has a very high summer population which overloaded the roading infrastructure.

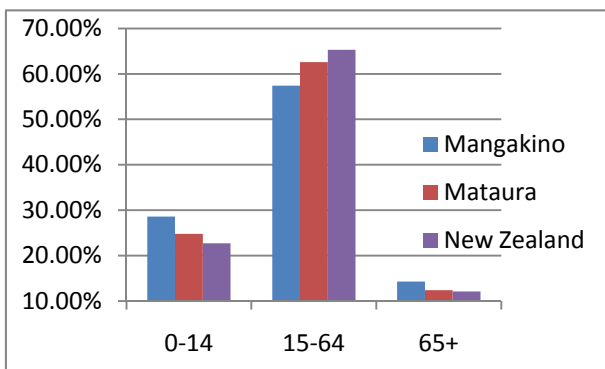


Figure 1 Age range of communities

(source NZ Census 2006)

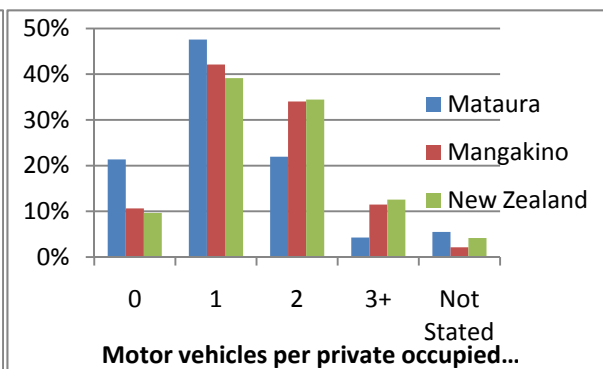


Figure 2 Household access to motor vehicles

(source NZ Census 2001)

Mataura and Mangakino have a large number of people who are not independent travellers and require assistance from others (friends and family) to access everyday goods and services. This reliance is not typically sustainable and there is a high risk that residents will relocate to a place where access to essential services is not dependent on access to a car.

South Mercury Bay has quite a different issue. Its infrastructure is overwhelmed in the peak summer months where its population multiplies by 15. At the peak of summer the population swells

to 13,000 (source Peak Population Survey 07/08, TCDC). Nearby Whitianga's population also increases over the summer peak period to 18,600.

This has significant impact on the local roads and parking as considerable numbers of visitors make their way to the area in summer. There were also drink driving safety concerns as people returned from Whitianga following public events such as New Years Eve. A bus service would only be effective if it were part of a wider traffic management plan.

Effective Community Consultation

Strong community consultation is essential to the success of community based transport services. Through a consultation process, 'buy in' can be established into any proposed solution and 'ownership' opportunities identified.

Here is how this worked in these communities:

Mangakino Through consultation, not only was the community reaction to a proposal required, but potential funders were also identified. Through this consultation process funding (directly or indirectly) was identified through; Environment Waikato, Taupo District Council, Lakes District Health Board, Lake Taupo PHO/LMG and Mangakino Community Agency (MCA). Consultation also identified the most appropriate timetable, bus type and cost to the community including fares.

Mataura The consultation for this project focussed on structured meetings involving the following groups; Gore and Mataura Ward councillors, Mataura Community Board members, Gore District Council officers, employer's representatives, Mataura community groups and bus operators. Consultation topics included; governance, procurement, funding (including fares), timetable, route, stops and bus type.

South Mercury Bay Consultation largely occurred within the committee structure of the Mercury Bay Community Board and generally included the topics as listed for Mataura. Environment Waikato (the regional council for the area), with responsibility for provision of passenger transport in the region, also undertook one off meetings with the major bus operator of the area and with the district council.

Quantifying demand for new transit services

Initially, quantifying demand for such new services was a difficult task. For Mangakino demand was unknown and based only on informal feedback of the likely use through the consultation process. In the case of Mataura, demand has been forecast using known patronage of the Mangakino service, given the very similar demographics and nature of the two communities. South Mercury Bay service patronage estimates were built 'from the bottom up' through design of a realistic timetable, estimating desired fare recovery ratio, fare levels and then assessing the ridership requirements against 'reasonableness' and 'reality.'

The Mangakino bus typically carries six passengers per journey, but full buses have been recorded at times, especially during school holidays. Patronage is highly dependent on weather indicating significant discretionary journey making. The Hahei to Ferry Landing service (Route 1) carried 4-6 people per average journey and the Hahei Park+Ride (Route 2) carried +30 passengers average per journey. The Mataura service has not been implemented yet.

Resulting public transport operations

Each solution, or proposed solution, was tailor-made for each community's unique situation.

Mangakino

A service commenced in May 2005 from Mangakino to Tokoroa via Whakamaru departing at 9.30am and returning from Tokoroa at 1.45pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays & Fridays. The service is contracted from a commercial bus company by Environment Waikato with regular reporting to Taupo District Council.

The timetable was designed to allow enough time for appointments to be met and shopping to be undertaken, but not too long that passengers' were left waiting with nothing else to do. Initially the

service allowed longer in Tokoroa but user feedback showed three hours is a good time span. No formal survey of journey purpose has been undertaken.

Fares were kept deliberately low, compared to the distance travelled, to encourage usage and in recognition of the limited disposable income of the Mangakino community. Co-funding by the District Health Board and the Primary Healthcare Organisation (PHO) enabled this lower fare structure. Prices were \$5 return for adults and \$3.50 for children.

Funding was provided by; Taupo District Council, Lakes District Health Board, Lake Taupo PHO/LMG (Coordinators of GP services) and NZ Transport Agency

The day to day running of the service, with regards to special bookings etc, is coordinated by the Mangakino Community Agency, operated by Taupo District Council. Priority seats are given to those travelling to Tokoroa with medical, dental or social service appointments. To ensure they get a seat to meet an appointment, customers can call the agency the day before travel to make a reservation.

Mataura

Following a presentation to the Gore District Council of the consultant's report a working party was set up. The working party includes two councillors, two community board members, three members of the Mataura Taskforce group and a council staff member.

Looking at the management of a transport service, the group is examining two distinct options. The lowest cost option is through use of a community trust model and volunteer drivers. This model however is high in management time requirements (by the trust). The higher cost model, where a transport company is contracted to provide a service, requires much less management time.

The timetable and fares currently used at Mangakino have been considered as a model for consultation in Mataura.

South Mercury Bay

The South Mercury Bay service looked to reduce congestion and parking issues in Hahei and Ferry Landing at peak periods and also provide mobility and road safety outcomes throughout the area. The service commenced in December 2008 and has run each year since over the peak summer period (generally from Boxing Day to the end of the school holidays – Route 1, and to the end of the second week in January – Route 2). Route 1 runs from Ferry Landing to Hot Water Beach via Cooks Beach and Hahei. Route 2 runs from Hahei to Cathedral Cove car park via park and ride. The service is contracted from commercial transport companies by Environment Waikato with regular reporting to Thames Coromandel District Council.

This year Route 1 ran every hour 9am to 7pm and Route 2 Every 15-20 minutes (continuous service)

Fares are varied for Route 1 from \$2-\$5 and Route 2 has a flat return fare of \$2. Cost recovery for 09/10 for Route 1 was 20% and for Route 2 was 66%.

Funding has been provided by Thames Coromandel District Council and NZ Transport Agency

Review – best practise

Community involvement

Best practice suggests that the community involved in the community transport proposition needs to 'own' the operation in order for it to be most successful.

Everyday ownership. In the case of Mangakino, seats on each trip are bookable and preference is given to those with medical appointments in Tokoroa. Bookings are taken by the District Council Office at Mangakino and advised to the bus operator. This ensures the Council (as a funding entity) is fully aware of the performance of the service and the office, as an intrinsic part of the Mangakino community, knows what is going on and can control aspects of use of the service.

Local traffic management. The most successful part of the South Mercury Bay service is the park and ride to Cathedral Cove, Route 2. Its success can be marked down to the effort the local

community put into directing traffic off the road and into large parking sites. The community must now look at how some of that success can be applied to Route 1.

Inter agency communication. According to the Thames Coromandel District Council, "Local knowledge and good inter-agency communication is credited with the development of the idea..."

Trial period & reviews

A two year trial initiated by funding partners is considered an appropriate first response to provision of a new service. Within this two year trial various monitoring points would be decided to allow modification of the service to ensure it was meeting the community's needs. At the 18 month mark a go, no-go decision can be made on the long term viability of the service, to allow time for a longer contract to be tendered, awarded and commenced by the conclusion of the two year trial.

The community should be given the opportunity to provide input into the reviews of the service to allow fine tuning. In areas where appropriate, the local community board appears to be an excellent forum for such reviews.

Funding

In New Zealand it is standard practice for local government (district/city/regional councils) to fund 50% of the net cost of bus services with the other 50% funded by central government through the New Zealand Transport Agency.

Both council and central government however are looking for up to 50% of the gross cost to be funded through fares. Sourcing funding from other areas (perhaps commercial interests such as supermarkets) may assist in keeping the actual fares down and usage up.

In Mangakino, seed funding through community health organisations, reflecting the need of Mangakino residents to travel to Tokoroa for appointments and prescriptions, assisted the start-up of the service. Ongoing funding is provided from the District Health Board for the same purpose.

Funding providers should be regularly communicated with on service provision outcomes and their funding conditions and timeframes closely monitored.

Summary

The success of community transport services comes down to:

1. A community initiated issue
2. Open discussion and acknowledgement of the issue in a community open forum
3. High level buy-in of the primary funder of any possible service
4. A consultation process involving the wider community including
 - a. Bus and taxi operators
 - b. Health groups (if applicable)
 - c. Local business
 - d. Local service organisations
 - e. Potential funders
 - f. Regulatory bodies
5. Formal feedback to the community forum on the consultation process and a recommended approach
6. Confirmation that the community will back the proposed approach
7. A trail period to enable comfort to potential funders and other backers
8. Regular reviews of the service involving the community

In New Zealand the communities of Mangakino and South Mercury Bay are just two examples of successful community transport. Mataura hopes to build on this success and start its service soon.

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