

Report 99.635

28 October 1999

File: CP/4/2/2

Report to the Policy and Finance Committee
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Strategic Communications and Policy Initiatives

1. Purpose

To seek approval for expenditure on specific projects from the budgetary allocation of \$400,000 that the Council allowed in the Annual Plan for strategic communications initiatives. Expenditure on three projects is proposed:

- Publication of regional economic data
- Focus group research
- Publication of a regional newspaper

2. Background

The Council made provision of \$400,000 for additional strategic communications initiatives in the 1999/2000 Annual Plan (report 99.328).

This report proposes expenditure on three specific strategic communications and policy initiatives – publication of regional economic data, focus group research to support the Long term Financial Strategy (LTFS) and publication of a regional newspaper. These initiatives are all consistent with the Council's desired direction of better engaging with the community.

The General Manager reported to Council on a number of possible Community Connections initiatives on 18 June 1999 (report 99.339). Councillors indicated that the initiatives that they were particularly interested in progressing were a regional newspaper, some form of market research or community consultation and further development of the Council's web site. Accordingly, officers have given priority to developing these particular Community Connections initiatives.

Councillors discussed the Council's role in the provision of regional economic information during a series of workshops in April on social, economic and environmental dimensions of the Wellington Region. Officers were asked to further investigate the issue of regional economic data. The Council has also received a number of requests, including a submission from the Regional Chamber of Commerce to the Proposed 1999/2000 Annual Plan, to resume publication of regional economic data. More recently this issue has also been raised in the context of exploring the Council's potential role in regional economic development (report 99.533).

Work is continuing on development of other strategic communication initiatives, including further development of the Council's web site. We hope to be able to seek the Council's support for such further work at its next meeting.

3. Publication of Regional Economic Data

Since discontinuing publication of economic data two years ago, the Council has received a number of requests to resume this role. In particular, the Regional Chamber of Commerce and the local economic development agencies in the Region have told the Council that regional economic information is not readily available to businesses and other people with an interest in the Wellington Region's economy.

The purpose of the proposed economic publication is to present economic data on the Wellington Region and to provide an analytical commentary on economic trends. The content of the proposed publication is still being developed. However it may, for example, include commentary on the economic outlook for the Region, an analysis of different economic indicators by Region and sub-regional level and an analysis of the contribution of different industries to the regional economy. In addition, the publication could potentially include other items of interest to businesses, for example relevant Council initiatives or recent business success stories in the Region.

The Auckland Regional Council already publishes a report on the economy of the Auckland Region, and it is proposed that this is a useful model for this Region's publication. The Auckland model is two publications per calendar year. A substantive publication is produced early in the year and includes in-depth analysis of the outlook for the Region and of the Region's industries. About six months later, a shorter report is produced updating the outlook for the Region and including recent economic data. It is proposed that the first Wellington Regional economic publication (the substantive report) would be produced in February/March 2000 and an update about six months later.

It is anticipated that copies of the regional economic publication would be distributed by the economic development agencies in the Region to local businesses and that the Council would distribute copies to other interested individuals and organisations. The publication could also be available electronically through the Council's web site.

The proposed budget for producing and distributing one regional economic publication (the substantive report) in the 1999/2000 financial year is \$35,000.

4. Focus Group Research to Support the LTFS

For some time the Council has discussed the need to better understand the nature of the issues and problems facing our local and regional communities. Council agreed in principle in May last year to the development of a public opinion survey mechanism to increase our understanding of regional community opinions, values and priorities (report 98.918). Since then officers have been exploring two questions: What is the best market research mechanism to use? and; When is the best time to survey the community?

After considering various market research mechanisms, officers are of the opinion that focus groups would be the most appropriate research tool. Whilst the Council has successfully used telephone based surveys for a number of targeted issues (eg. willingness to pay for the Stadium and public ownership of the water supply), the broad based nature of this exercise requires an in-depth "strategic conversation" type approach. The objective of the focus group discussions would be to broadly ascertain community views on values and priorities for the Region, current and potential roles for the Council and relative priorities for expenditure.

It is proposed that November would be a suitable time for conducting the focus group research so that it can feed into the development of the LTFS. The advantage of this timing within the overall LTFS cycle, is that Councillors are sufficiently down the track in developing their vision and outcome statements, for these to be explored with members of the community.

The proposed focus group exercise is modest in scale, rather than a fully representative community consultation. It is an opportunity to "test the water" and explore the extent that the mechanism is a useful way of both engaging with the community and generating useful information for the LTFS process. There could be potential to develop the mechanism further in future years. It should be noted that the proposed focus group research is distinct from the formal consultation process on the LTFS, which the Council will undertake in April/May 2000.

If the proposal is accepted Councillors will be invited to nominate one person each who might be appropriate to be a member of a focus group. Such people should have an ability to think strategically.

The proposed budget for the focus group research is \$30,000.

5. 'Elements' - the proposed WRC regional newspaper

The overall purpose of the proposed regional newspaper is to better communicate with the public of our Region using a medium which is totally under WRC control.

The regional newspaper will:

- Provide a platform for the promotion of WRC issues, events and developments;
- Encourage the community to become more involved in our work;
- Showcase our regional resources and illustrate how they are used by the community;
- Provide an opportunity for the regional community to contribute articles, letters, and photos;
- Raise overall awareness of what the WRC is and what we do.

The regional newspaper forms a key part of the WRC's community connections programme and will be pivotal in the promotion of such things as our enhanced website, the LTFS, Y2K readiness, the Stadium open day, etc.

The newspaper proposal was developed by the WRC Communications Section and took into account: the successful use of newspapers by many other regional councils; the cost-benefit implications of operating our own publication against advertising in existing community and/or metropolitan newspapers; the opportunities for promoting the profile of the WRC in accordance with the overall community connections programme; and the increased community 'engagement' such a publication will allow.

A brief was developed and three design/print companies quoted for the project based on six issues per year.

Control of content will be the responsibility of the WRC Communications Section, but we would look for input from across the Council, as we do for stories for *Coast to Coast*. Content should therefore be planned strategically well in advance.

As mentioned, we also hope to encourage contributions from some of our 'customers,' such as park users, river users, commuters, boaties, and perhaps also offer the opportunity for trainee journalists to provide material. There is no budget for professional contributions from freelance writers. Editing and proofing will be the Communications Section's responsibility.

We feel it's important to begin work on *Elements* immediately. The impending click-over to the year 2000 signals an opportunity for highlighting many issues, not least of which will be how Y2K might affect the region (and what preparations are being undertaken), and January's combined Regional Council - Wellington City Council - WestpacTrust Stadium Open Day. To get the first issue published in the first week of December is highly desirable.

The proposed budget for the 1999/2000 financial year of \$120,000 is for the first four issues of the regional newspaper and includes initial one-off development costs, some sub-contracted photography and distribution around the Region.

7. **Communications**

These initiatives are all still under development and communications tools will be developed to publicise them at the appropriate time.

8. **Recommendations**

The Committee recommends that the Council:

- (1) *Approves expenditure of \$35,000 for production and distribution of a regional economic publication from the budgetary allocation for Elected Members in 1999/2000 for strategic communications.*
- (2) *Approves expenditure of \$30,000 for focus group research to support the Long Term Financial Strategy, from the budgetary allocation for Elected Members in 1999/2000 for strategic communications.*
- (3) *Approves expenditure of \$120,000 for publication of a regional newspaper from the budgetary allocation for Elected Members in 1999/2000 for strategic communications.*

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