

CASE STUDY

Community Empowerment: But can you trust the people?

David Hammond (Director at Hammond Robertson Limited), Apr 18, 2016, LinkedIn

Elected councils' greatest fear – if you give power back to communities, they will repay you with wishlists that no one can pay for.

There is a strange paradox I have observed. When a council centralises power and decision-making, the local people demand more and they throw stones at the council through the media. But when power, FUNDING responsibility and decision-making are devolved to local communities, they become prudent and their energies are directed to the new responsibilities they've been given.

An example is the Mercury Bay Community Board (a publicly elected group of people to represent local issues in the Bay) to whom their council devolved 14 services to (including level of service decisions, asset and strategic planning, and funding). That Board and its Area Manager set a goal of annually replacing \$250,000 of rates funding with funding from other sources. In three years they achieved \$200,000 replacement of rates with alternative funding to run services, and did so without cutting service levels.

But I want to talk about Thames Community Board. The following exciting example from Thames Community Board shows the potential of these local elected Boards.

Not only can they match the competency of the head office of a council but they can achieve more innovation and stronger community engagement and ownership over local services.

Thames Community Board's latest project is the upgrade of Coromandel's busiest playground, Porritt Park, in the town's CBD.

The project emerged as a priority from a Thames Urban Design Strategy (TUDS). TUDS is a Community Board-led community engagement process which anchors council staff work priorities, asset planning and long term budget development. There are a range of community engagement tools including participatory budgetting used in the formation of this local Community Board plan.

The Board's Area Office staff decided on a new playground design by starting with local school students from Parawai, St Francis, Thames South, Moanataiari and Te Puru Primary Schools.



[Pictured: Playground manufacturers pitching equipment and their tender to students at Thames Primary School]

The students researched and surveyed their peers at school. Equipment manufacturers then came and pitched their tenders and designs to the school students who quizzed them on equipment warranties, designs and their willingness to work with other equipment manufacturers. The students presented their research and conclusions to an Advisory Panel of Thames Community Board, council staff and Lions Club for decisions on the successful tenderer and design.

The new Porritt Park playground was completed in January 2016.

Rounding out the project - which included new toilets - the Community Board and Guild of Public Artists launched a mural competition for school students to submit their entries. The mural was to cover the rear wall of the new toilet block and six selected designs painted by the students onto large panels on the wall. Local Thames (and nationally recognised) mural artist, Paul Sylvester, is leading the judging panel. Awesome!

With most community facilities the Thames Community Board will set a target for community and grant fundraising before it contributes the balance. As part of the Board's disciplined project management approach, setting the community target for fundraising is important. Having such a target tests whether the facility is genuinely a community priority or not. If the community cannot achieve the target, the reason is likely because other community projects are taking a higher priority for the citizens at that time. And that's OK.

This is a further step in the checks and balances approach that local Community Boards can use to ensure they are focussing on community priorities, knowing that all projects are vying for limited funding.