

Press Release – For Immediate Release

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### **RDC Digs Itself Deeper into Social Housing Development Hole**

Ruapehu District Council (RDC) doubled down on its controversial large-scale 'Ohakune Social Housing Project' today, voting against a pause to better consult the community and undertake proper due diligence.

There is widespread community opposition to the plan to build up to 150 social houses, across three stages, in the small town with just 1000 residents.

Today's vote was held during a special meeting that arose from a public forum in August in which the community roundly rejected the council's social housing scheme and demanded low density housing solutions instead.

Mayor Weston Kirton promised the 160-plus people gathered in August – some 95 per cent in opposition – that RDC would hold a special meeting to consider the future of the Teitei Drive housing development it is progressing in partnership with Housing NZ, Kainga Ora.

Barry Murphy, a spokesman for a community group representing 200 Ohakune ratepayers, says RDC has dug itself into a deeper hole in forgoing this opportunity to reassess the proposal.

"Those councilors who voted to proceed have actually voted to breach their own district plan policy which the community agreed to. That is the level of ineptitude we're dealing with here in RDC.

"RDC had a chance to vote for a pause, to undertake proper due diligence on the social housing project, something independent experts say is lacking and will lead to significant cost overruns that will be carried by ratepayers.

"This would have given RDC the opportunity to avoid costly legal challenges the council simply can't afford. They've blown it."

A vote to proceed with the project was won by the narrowest of margins: five votes to four.

"This illustrates there's a split council, with individuals driving personal agendas against the wishes of the community.

"It has also become very clear that there has been woeful consultation. The project has been planned in secret and deliberately kept from the community," says Murphy.

"Members of the council almost unanimously agreed with that statement at today's meeting."

RDC councilor Lyn Neeson, who proposed a motion to pause and take stock, pointed out the council runs the "very real risk of a judicial review" and falling foul of it.

"The community has not been adequately consulted," she told today's council meeting. "In fact, they have been deceived."

Neeson warned that the disposal of the land earmarked for development to Kainga Ora was a direct breach of council's significance policy.

"The proposal has breached our significance policy without a doubt – it has been about a set of moving goal posts and appeasing government ministers who have targets to meet for housing.

"We've been forced to do this in private without community consultation. We need to engage effectively and honestly with the community. We've been forced to race against the clock because there's a financial carrot in front of us.

"We've opened ourselves up to a judicial review."

Murphy says the prospect of looming deadlines and losing funds RDC obtained from the Government for shovel-ready projects during Covid has led to a cascade of poor decision-making.

"They've also engineered a problem to get the money and keep the ball rolling, repeatedly claiming an 'urgent need' for this housing scheme. Yet there are only 13 families on the MSD wait list in Ohakune, families who could easily be housed today using existing market stock.

"RDC and their build partners were embarrassed when that was exposed, so their PR practitioners recently came up with a ghost population of undisclosed homeless that conveniently can't be quantified supposedly because 'they 'don't trust social services and won't go on any list'."

No one is against finding homes for those in need, Murphy points out, but there is ample affordable housing stock in Ohakune and the wider Ruapehu region for homeless and worker rental accommodation.

"There are solutions that would safeguard the character of Ohakune and the development site, which is adjacent to the famous Carrot Adventure Park, a national icon," he says.

"RDC refuses to look at alternatives such as retrofitting existing houses, though, which is cheaper than building from scratch, because it would mean losing the free government money even though their social housing scheme doesn't stack up financially anyway.

"This is a council totally out of control with public money, riding roughshod of ratepayers rights, and withholding public information from the community."

Neeson's assertion at the meeting supports the widely-held view that RDC is continually changing the narrative to support its case.

"We started with one intention [small-scale, low density social housing] and ended up in an entirely different place," she told the meeting.

"This proposal goes directly against our own spatial plan... the goal posts have changed significantly."

A petition of over 1200 signatures opposing the development was presented to Parliament earlier this month.

The integrity of the plan took a major hit in August when it was revealed a senior planner leading the project for Kainga Ora was found to have a conflict of interest which was only formally lodged after residents questioned him and his employer.

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