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**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN NEW ZEALAND
REGIONAL COUNCILS** ²⁴⁰/₃₃₃

A thesis presented
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

In 1989 and 1991, the New Zealand Parliament enacted legislation which reformed local government structure and planning processes. Inherent in these statutes are, among other things, the strengthening of regional councils and the prescription of opportunities for active public participation in the decision-making process. To explore the impact of these legislative mandates, it was felt that the philosophy and practice of public participation in New Zealand regional councils should be analyzed. This study, therefore, sets out to critically examine the philosophies of public participation held by decision-makers in regional councils; establish the relationships between these philosophies and the actual practice of public participation; and assess the effectiveness of participatory processes adopted.

A two-fold approach was adopted towards meeting the study goal and objectives. Firstly, in-depth case studies of the participatory activities adopted by two Regional Councils were undertaken. Thus, the strategies adopted by the Taranaki Regional Council and the Hawke's Bay Regional Council to involve the public in its annual planning process, regional policy statement development, and consents processing were examined. Specifically, for consent processing, an actual consent application process handled by each Council was studied. These concerned the discharge permit application of Egmont Tanneries Ltd., in Taranaki, and the renewal of the resource consents of Richmond (Takapau) Ltd. in Hawke's Bay.

Through examination of council documents, interviews with council officers, and a survey of submitters and consents applicants, the overall public participation strategy for each Council was determined. It was observed that the Taranaki Regional Council had an overall program for public involvement, which was geared towards building sound public support for the council. The Hawke's Bay Regional Council was found wanting in terms of not having a public participation programme. However, *ad hoc* public participation activities have focused towards gathering the

views of the regional community in order to provide the Council with some guidance as to the direction that its policies should follow.

Secondly, a national postal survey of decision-makers in regional councils and unitary authorities was conducted. The survey aimed to ascertain the attitudes and concepts that decision-makers hold about public participation; the kind of power afforded to public participants, and the objectives of programmes carried out by each Council; to identify the techniques employed and to see whether these are the techniques preferred; and to determine their perceptions on what public participation has achieved. Decision-makers were asked to use a five-point Likert scale to rate 15 statements on public participation, 19 techniques suggested by the then Ministry of Works and Development (1978b) for local bodies to utilise, and eight outcomes of public participation.

A response rate of 76.53% was achieved from the national survey of 98 decision-makers in 12 regional councils and four unitary authorities. Using a t-test procedure, it was found that decision-makers subscribe to the democratic ideal that citizens have the right to be consulted on policies and proposals affecting them. However, this test found that they are not ready to totally share their decision-making power with citizens as prescribed by the radical theory of democracy. The national survey results also showed that decision-makers favour public participation techniques that are statutorily prescribed, relatively easy to use, and less costly to run. Decision-makers felt that the purpose of public participation was to realise the objectives of decision-making, support-building, conflict management and education.

Using an F-test procedure, it was established that certain respondent characteristics affected the predisposition to public participation. Female decision-makers and elected members were more inclined to involve the public in the planning process. On the other hand, younger decision-makers and those from unitary authorities were less inclined to public participation. Further research to explore these differences in more detail is recommended.

From both the case studies and the national survey, it was concluded that the Parliamentary mandate for public participation strongly supports its actual practice at the regional level. It was also concluded that there is a lack of consistency between expected results of participatory exercises and the actual outcomes. Thus, it is recommended that the purpose of public participation be clearly specified in order for regional councils, and their respective regional communities, to develop a public participation program. Finally, regular discussions among practitioners, academics, and the general public on different aspects of public participation can ensure a more complete absorption and acceptance of public involvement in the decision-making process.

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