

Democracy Now - Warren Woodgryer

The South Wairarapa District Council was established in 1989 through the amalgamation of the Martinborough, Greytown, and Featherston Borough Councils and the Featherston County Council. Mike Gray, a consultant during the amalgamation, noted that Brian Elwood, the commissioner, and the chairmen of the four councils strongly emphasized preserving the unique character of each town and rural community.

Democracy Now believes this amalgamation has drifted from four core principles:

Community identity

Community representation

Community perspectives, concerns, and views

Community voice

In my submission, I propose reinstating these principles by restoring the pre-1989 council structure. Reversing the amalgamation to re-establish the four original councils would be a complex process, likely treated as a local government reorganisation under the Local Government Act 2002 and overseen by the Local Government Commission (LGC).

A proposal to de-amalgamate could originate from the community (via a petition) or the South Wairarapa District Council. A petition would require signatures from at least 10% of electors in the affected area (the current South Wairarapa District) to prompt LGC consideration. I believe this is achievable, given the recent petition by Leah Hawkins, which gathered over 1,000 signatures to restrict rate increases. Additionally, the 2017 Wairarapa amalgamation poll, where 59% voted against further consolidation, demonstrates that public sentiment can be decisive. This gives me hope that ratepayer support could drive the reversal of the 1989 amalgamation.

The proposal would need to define the boundaries of the restored councils (e.g., the original boroughs of Martinborough, Greytown, Featherston, and Featherston County) and demonstrate that de-amalgamation aligns with "good local government" principles, such as efficiency, representation, and cost-effectiveness (Local Government Act 2002, Schedule 3). The LGC would assess the proposal, consulting residents, iwi, businesses, and other stakeholders, and evaluating factors like financial viability, service delivery, governance capacity, and community support.

Financial viability is critical to returning to a pre-1989 council structure. As outlined in my submission, I believe each council could better target its rates to meet its unique character and needs, with appropriate staffing levels to deliver value for money. Pre-1989 administrative staffing levels were lower than those proposed in my submission, suggesting potential efficiencies.

While the Long-Term Plan (LTP) shows annual rate increases lower than the 20% hikes of previous years, the compounded effect reveals a different story. Including this financial year and the next three, total rates (including water services) are projected to rise by 34%. Over nine years, this compounds to an 88% increase. For example, my current rates are \$5,900, requiring an income of \$7,200 at a 17.5% tax rate. By 2028/29, I would need to earn \$9,648, and by 2033/34, a staggering \$13,536—equivalent to \$1,128 monthly. These figures highlight the true burden on ratepayers. The Local Government Cost Index, assumed at approximately 2% annually, may be unrealistic given potential economic challenges, such as impending tariffs and supply chain disruptions. Only time will tell.

Governance and local support raise further considerations. Are the current mayor and councillors content with these projected rate increases, especially when presented as actual costs? Will ratepayers accept the financial strain? How will prospective mayors and councillors feel about committing to those increases for at least two more election cycles?

The de-amalgamation process could take 2–3 years, including establishing new administrative systems and district plans. Major reorganizations may require amendments to the Local Government Act 2002 schedules, necessitating parliamentary approval. The Minister of Local Government could influence the outcome, particularly if central government priorities, such as cost efficiency, conflict with local aspirations.

However, challenges remain. De-amalgamation would likely face legislative hurdles, and central government priorities may not align with community desires. Encouragingly, the National Party's emphasis on localism and the ACT Party's plan to field candidates in local elections to promote "common sense" signal a growing focus on decentralised governance and local decision-making, which could support such a shift.