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Government needs to help councils find savings

David Bublitz

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Prime Minister Christopher Luxon at a recent national conference, where he told councils to get back to basics.

David Bublitz is the deputy mayor of New Plymouth, a board member of Sport Taranaki, and director of sport at New Plymouth Boys' High School.

OPINION: An idea recently floated about exploring potential council mergers in the Southland region could start a major overhaul in the local government sector as the search for cost savings ramps up.

With previous Three Waters legislation now revamped to Local Water Done Well, the Government has encouraged councils struggling with escalating infrastructure costs to amalgamate water and wastewater assets.

The Government's underlying assumption is that efficiencies can be found through increasing scale.

While that's good in theory, these major overhauls will take years to flow through at a time councils across New Zealand are grappling with escalating costs, tightening budgets and increasing demands.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon has demanded councils get on with "doing the basics brilliantly", and within that challenge must be a recognition that practical and pragmatic support from Wellington will be critical to alleviating some of the financial challenges being faced.



New Plymouth deputy mayor David Bublitz believes the Government could do a number of things to help councils find savings.

VANESSA LAURIE / TARANAKI DAILY NEWS

Having considered the situation, here are some easily implemented solutions that could deliver for everyone:

Rethinking Māori ward referendums

Perhaps one of the more controversial Government decisions has been the requirement for councils to hold referendums on Māori wards. This move has created unnecessary division and will impose financial burdens on local ratepayers. Rather than promoting inclusive representation, the referendum will distract from the Government's core focus on economic growth, deepen community rifts and cost ratepayers money.

Revising appeal rights on District Plans

The District Plan is a fundamental document that guides local government, yet the ability for parties to appeal decisions made by commissioners causes expensive delays and confusion.

NPDC adopted its Proposed District Plan more than a year ago and there are still mediation and hearings in the Environment Court challenging decisions. By removing unnecessary appeal rights, councils could move forward with essential



Speed limits should not be changed, Bublitz thinks. (File photo)
STUFF

Stability in speed limit regulations

Frequent changes to speed limits not only create confusion among residents, they also incur substantial costs in terms of signage and resources. By not changing speed limits again, the Government would enable local authorities to allocate their time and resources more effectively.

Local authority control over parking fines

would not only improve revenue but also enhance public compliance and safety.

Consistency amidst political change

As a councillor with experience through only a single government change, the amount of political fluctuation is staggering. A more consistent, cross-party approach to local government projects would ensure that ongoing initiatives receive the stability they need to succeed.

The financial implications of altering or halting projects that may have taken years of planning are immense.

The recent roundabout and cycleway projects that have been stopped dead in their tracks or materially altered highlights the huge wastage caused by political shifts.

Ensuring bipartisan support for local projects would provide councils with the stability necessary for effective governance.



GST on rates is a tax on a tax. (File photo)
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Abolishing GST on rates

This, like all the other ideas, is not a new concept. By reallocating GST from rates, a tax on a tax, to community infrastructure the government would provide immediate relief to local authorities, allowing them to invest those funds into the desperately needed infrastructure required to unlock new housing and economic growth.

Equitable rate payments from central Government

Additionally, the Government should be held accountable for its landholdings by paying rates just like any other landowner. This measure would not only alleviate some financial strain on smaller local councils with large public landholdings in their territories but also promote fairness in the funding mechanisms that support community services.

By addressing these areas, the Government can empower local councils to operate more efficiently and effectively, allowing them to focus on what truly matters - serving their communities.

It's time for the central Government to act on its commitment to "do the basics brilliantly" and provide the necessary remedies for local authorities to deliver improved outcomes for the communities we serve.



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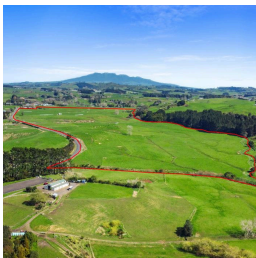
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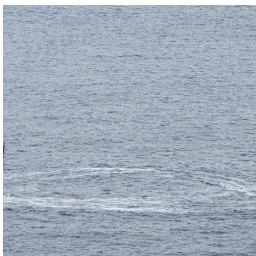
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