

# *Wellington Issues*

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## The View from Wellington

Good afternoon everyone, and many thanks to Peter for that very thorough overview of the subject we are considering at this vital conference.

It falls to me to present a picture of just what the situation is in Wellington, as a case study to highlight the general framework of our discussions.

Well, the view from Wellington is that there have been many transformations in this town in recent years. Most of them very positive indeed, but I'm afraid the same can't be said for our experience with the new age road corridor.

In fact, it doesn't take much of a flight of fancy to see our situation in world hotspot headline terms.

You could say that in the past, Wellington City Council was something of a ragged army in retreat.

But now I believe that we have the makings here in the capital city, of a truly credible international peacekeeping force.

After all, we've got a classic trouble-spot situation...trenches and craters; debris and dust; demoralised civilians; aggressive militia of various factions – some highly trained, others forced into the fray for a pittance; warlords and their powerful backers overseas; wily strategists well-hidden in their bunkers; an intricate maze of shifting allegiances; mighty propaganda battles to win the hearts and minds of the cowed townsfolk and nearby peasantry.....

And in the middle of it all, officers of the WCC, led by Comrade Commander Stavros Michael, trying to negotiate an absolutely positive peace treaty to usher in a new era of civic cooperation and peace!

Well, it doesn't take much imagination to see things through a Wellywood lens round here!

Basically, there's carnage both on the road and under it. And doing something about the latter is what this conference is all about.

In Wellington, in the last ten years there has been a tenfold increase in the number of trenches worked by utility operators in our Central Business District alone.

From 602 in 1989 to 6326 in 2001.

You can say it's because of the proliferation of communication service providers in our dynamic business environment. Or it's just the stupidity of the market.

Whatever the reasons, the net result has been chaos on our roads, significant inconvenience to the public and major damage to our infrastructure.

Major routes like Thorndon Quay were opened up for months on end because two operators refused to share the trench, so one dug one side, and the other dug the other side as soon as the first was finished.

An obvious dilemma for the Council's work programme, as much as a hassle for the public. Like how could we tell when to re-surface the road when the companies would not tell us about their work planning.

But who was the public going to blame when the road gets dug up just after a nice coat of blacktop.....the bloody council of course.....

(people assume that local government actually governs, if not always well!)

Companies that fly one day with one flag, then drop their camouflage for another the next, just pass in the night. Their logos are outta there, but when the Council guys come along to clean up the mess, them's what get the blame.

Here's an example. TelstraSaturn employed a contractor to roll out their network in the vicinity of the Town Hall. That contractor employed another to actually do the work.

One night last September they dug just outside the MFC and found a 400mm pipe. They didn't know what it was, so spiked it to see. Thanks very much for nothing, said our rising sewer main, which to put it bluntly blew a lovely fountain of sewerage some 15 metres high, shutting down pumping stations, causing an overflow into the harbour and the street.

The WRC could have prosecuted us for breaching our resource consent, let alone the danger to public health.

What did the contractors do? Call up the emergency services? Scramble all their resources to fix their mistake? No. They walked off the job. We found out from people phoning in. It took a night and day to fix.

Then there's the well-known case of the gas leak in the CBD about 18 months ago. It was an extremely threatening situation because of the time it took to find out just which company was responsible for the supply to that building.

We were very fortunate that time, and our emergency services got a real shock when they realised how out of control that situation could have easily have become.

So that type of experience has hardened our resolve. We all know that various unconnected Acts of Parliament allow utility operators to gain access to our road corridors, but councils are fighting back.

We have the right to impose conditions and we have made them tougher.

I understand the same is happening with our friends in Auckland, who are imposing conditions that are strictly speaking challengeable under the current outmoded legal framework.

But the companies know that if they win according to the letter of the law in the District Court, the Council will appeal, and it'll be two years before they can jump in their trench.

So they are minded to play ball.

In Wellington we have increased the number of site inspections from our Roothing Protection Team.

We also call for a bank bond of \$50,000 for every request made to open a trench. That really makes them think...do we need that trench?

In Courtenay Place recently three companies wanted to open trenches. We just refused until they agreed to do it together and negotiate a sharing plan. They agreed.

With regard to trenches owned by various utility operators that are substandard in terms of reinstatement, we have over 1000.

Now we are telling them they can't make any new ones until the old ones are fixed. They are doing it.

Carrots and sticks.

Slowly things are improving. We are holding regular utility meetings to try and share as much information as possible.

We don't want to obstruct the development of the city, but we have a responsibility to protect community assets. And we fully support the work going on to deliver a national code of practice.

There's also the significant question of rating. This is on the agenda for all of us now, whether we like it or not.

In Wellington the option we are looking at is to rate utilities at a level equivalent to the General Rate of the Commercial Sector. About \$3.8M all up. This won't raise any extra revenue but rather slightly alter the proportions paid by the various sectors, with a small advantage going to the commercial sector.

But now that the rating of utilities is here I think we must look at how that might be used as an instrument to promote good corporate behaviour.

The obvious case is as an incentive to undergrounding unsightly cables. This is a contentious issue for both Wellington and Auckland, with a great deal of public interest.

A lot of policy work needs to be done in this area and I'd be very pleased if Wellington were to lead the way on that.

Basically, it is no longer acceptable for transporters to deliver their goods in fume-belching old-dungers. And fish shops can't create the stink of yester-year, even across the road from Parliament.

It's the same for the visual pollution caused by cabling and the ground-level chaos caused by uncoordinated trenching.

Of course, the poor old utilities probably think they are getting it in the neck every way they turn. Strung up if they string up, and cursed when they go to take them way down.

Well, it's all about learning to do things better. Simple as that.

It's going to come down to much better planning and co-ordination, better legislation, and a situation where industrial best practice automatically includes cooperation.

In the meantime my best wishes to all the councils round the country in their search for the most effective mix of carrots and sticks for their area and their mix of problems.

At this stage of the game both are absolutely necessary.

End.