



6 November 2008

SPEECH NOTES

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**MAYOR CHALLENGES CHAMBER TO TAKE LEADERSHIP  
ROLE**

**“Wanganui’s greatest problem is declining population”**

*Mayor Michael Laws and the Wanganui District Council hosted a special cocktail function for the Wanganui Chamber of Commerce and its membership at 5pm Thursday 6 November in the Council Chambers.*

The purpose of the function is to seek “a closer relationship between the council and commerce in advancing the city as a prime destination for businesses and families.”

“Our greatest challenge is Wanganui’s declining population. Since 1991, Wanganui district’s population has declined by over 2,000 people.

Worse – the decline has been most marked in the 20-34 and 20-39 years age brackets. This is the key demographic for growth because these are the child-rearing ages.\* (*see figures at end of this speech*) In fact, we have lost almost one-third of our 20-34 age group since 1991.

By contrast, our retired, elderly population has grown during that period\*.”

Mayor Laws said that population decline directly affects the quality of education, health and policing that a community receives.

“The Wanganui District Council recognizes the danger in these statistics – and that to accept such a decline is to accept the withering of Wanganui. As mayor, I have refused to admit to this seemingly inevitable decline.”

**Family friendly strategy is the key**

“If we cannot retain – and attract – families to our city and district, then Wanganui will suffer a terminal decline that will only reduce available services and amenities ... and increase rates to service existing infrastructure.

“To those who say that population growth is not important, and that small is good ... my answer is that you obviously aren’t going to mind the double digit rate increases coming your way over the next few years.

“The more people in Wanganui ... the less our collective, and individual, rates burden. It is a simple equation.”

### **We must resist the desire to do nothing**

“Another hindrance to Wanganui’s forward progression ... is our innate conservatism that wells up from time to time – and acts as an anchor to our aspirations.

“A good example is the forthcoming referendum – with council critics campaigning for no projects to be undertaken. Ever. Their argument appears to be that rates are too high ... so let’s do nothing.

“I couldn’t imagine a quicker path to economic suicide. Doing nothing is never an option: it is a state of mind that we must resist at all costs.

“It’s not that I don’t have sympathy with the need for rates restraint. In fact, my council has delivered the lowest rate rises – over the past three successive years – of any council in New Zealand.

“But we must retain families and attract new ones. And we can’t do that if Wanganui’s services, facilities and utilities fail in comparison with Napier or Nelson – Hamilton or Hastings.

**“We are in a competition for people, skills, businesses and growth. Not entering that race is the quickest path to failure, stagnation, decline and a slow death. I reject that future, implicitly.”**

### **Chamber needs to step up**

“Which is why I hosted this function tonight.

“I need the Chamber – and its membership – to play a greater leadership role in our community. To be a sail, not an anchor ... to champion innovation and enterprise ... to help us to help you.

“If we are to progress Wanganui – then the commercial community needs to be in the vanguard. It needs to define the impediments to its own growth and development ... identify the ways in which council might address those ... and work with us in not simply resolving deficiencies ... but designing an ongoing communication to achieve our mutual ends.

“I can certainly pledge my energy to that partnership.

### **A joint Mayoral/Chamber Enterprise Committee**

“One way in which the Chamber – as the representative voice of Wanganui commerce – can assist council instantly, is in assisting us in establishing a joint Enterprise Committee.

“The purpose of the committee would be to identify ways in which the council can attract new business to Wanganui ... grow existing business ... and identify those areas of council activity that hinder or help such concerns.

“We are required to enforce and interpret various legislation emanating from Parliament – from the Resource Management Act to the new Building Act – but the way we interpret, communicate and assist is always going to be an issue.”

“And so I leave you with that challenge, tonight. And the chance to play a real role in growing our city and arresting its downward decline.”

***1991-2006 Census Statistics for Wanganui***

<b>Wanganui</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>Total Popn</b>	<b>44,703</b>	<b>45,042</b>	<b>43,263</b>	<b>42,636</b>
15-34	13,035	12,063	10,206	9,537
20-34	9,531	8,778	7,206	6,444
20-39	12,681	12,144	10,287	9,147
65-plus	6,327	6,780	6,951	7,359

ENDS