



MARCHMENT HILL

- consulting -

Building Connection and Community Benefit



What role should a water utility play in a rural or regional community? Its activities could extend across three levels:

- stay close to customer-focused services
- provide more general services - environment protection or future service capacity
- play a broader role in regional economic development.

From their beginnings in the infrastructure age of the late 1800s, water utilities did indeed play this broader role. Public infrastructure was the vehicle for industrial development and successful urbanisation, and roads, railways, sewers and water supply systems were central to this ambition. In its early days, Melbourne Water was responsible for city planning, including the structure of urban development, roads, parks and waterways as well as water and sewerage services(1). For many regional towns, the provision of heavily subsidised water and sewerage services played a valuable role in attracting industry - and the regional jobs, skills and opportunities that came with it.

More recent interest in efficiency has encouraged water utilities to refocus their attention on their most proximate role - cost to serve and customer service. Substantial gains have been made through conscious attention to service levels, costs and cost drivers. Which begs the question, if we simply want lowest cost service provision, does it make more sense to increase the centralisation of governance and management activities

rather than continue with a decentralised model of decision-making around water services?

Certainly, there are cost savings to be made from partnering, or shared services, as covered in another article MHC article regarding shared services. However, a local decision-making presence allows for greater resilience in fast-moving situations, or disasters, and a closer connection to the current and future needs of the community.

No matter the model, it takes a local decision-maker to draw out and follow through on how a water business (typically one of the larger sources of skills and organisational acumen) can help build value for its community. Embedded in the community, opportunities for development emerge more readily.

An example of this kind of serendipity is the Hundertwasser toilets.



Kawakawa is a small town in Northland New Zealand, close to the Bay of Islands. Originally developed as a coal-mining town in the late-1800s, Kawakawa was known for the railway that ran down the middle of the main street. When Friedensreich Hundertwasser, the internationally-noted Austrian architect, made Kawakawa his second home in the 1970s, the town had already suffered considerable economic decline. Hundertwasser was also an enthusiastic ecologist and developed great affection for Kawakawa and its surrounds, planting thousands of trees on his own property and campaigning to preserve the heritage buildings of the town.

In the manner of small communities, when Kawakawa needed to replace its public toilets in the centre of town, Hundertwasser was asked if he would help. The resulting toilet block is an extravaganza of colour and organic

form, built with the assistance of locals and schoolchildren, and with a grass roof fertilised by visitors' deposits.

The Kawakawa toilets are the only Hundertwasser project to be built in the southern hemisphere. Quite apart from the fun of building and using them, the community benefits from tourism - the Kawakawa toilets attract around 10,000 visitors per month(3). Using figures from Phillip Island, Victoria for comparison(4), an equivalent number of daytrippers would spend about AUD13 million per year.

Anyone doubting the attraction of the Hundertwasser toilets need only consult TripAdvisor(5) where the toilets get second-place billing, with 171 reviews and four stars, just a small margin behind first place-taker, the Victorian toilets in Rothesay, Scotland.



For my part, I prefer Hundertwasser's version for its sheer exuberance. He wrote:

"I am very happy that I could do something for Kawakawa. It is only a toilet but it should show that even small things can bring beauty into our life. A little bit more feeling brings a lot more fun. We live only once and money making is not all. It is harmony with beauty and harmony with nature which makes us really feel good. Beauty has an important function. Beauty is always underestimated."

In their small way, the Hundertwasser toilets demonstrate the opportunities available to local water managers to play a role in building economic prosperity and social cohesion at the same time as supporting growth and providing affordable services.

Footnotes:

(1) Goldsmith, S, Samson, D, & Robertson, W (2008). *From Organisation to Whole-of-System Excellence: The issue of water*. In K. J. Foley & P. Hermel (Eds.), *The Theories and Practices of Organisation Excellence: New Perspectives*. Sydney, Australia: SAI Global.

(2) *Emerging Issue: Shared services*

(3) www.hundertwasserpark.com/centre.html

(4) <http://www.tourism.vic.gov.au/research/economic-significance.html>

(5) https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/Attraction_Review-g2093681-d2078409-Reviews-Kawakawa_Public_Toilets_by_Hundertwasser-Kawakawa_Northland_Region_North_Island.html