

Timing is everything: Synchronicities in Mataura.

Initiative: Mataura

Theme: Community Building

Back in 2007, community leaders of the Southland town of Mataura had received some concerning research about the health of the community. Not people to sit around, they rallied the locals to come together to do something about it. At about the same time, the Community Trust of Southland (CToS) Chief Executive, John Prendergast, had begun to champion ideas of community-led development following a study tour to Canada led by Mary-Jane Rivers, who later founded Inspiring Communities. With support from CToS who were clear that they were funding a process, not a project, the Mataura Taskforce was born.



"The success to date in my mind has been very good", said John in 2009, "The Mataura Taskforce is still totally owning and driving the work, and they have sustained enthusiasm."

And locals agreed. While the planned revitalisation of Mataura's main street may become the most visible improvement to visitors to the town, the most powerful successes of the Mataura Taskforce were rooted in a focus on creating visions rather than fixing problems. This approach has enabled the development of more productive partnerships with Council, government agencies, local health and social service providers and funders; increased participation from the many sectors of the community; community initiatives including community gardens, a Mataura gala and community market, arts development, historic walks, new road safety projects and a revitalisation of kapa haka. It has also seen the involvement of school children in environmental restoration work on the riverbank; new early childhood education options and community conversations about what was needed, wanted, and not understood.

With such a lot going on, and recognising that there were limits to the extent to which volunteers could sustain the energy required to respond to emerging opportunities, the Taskforce drew on its relationships to seek funding for a Community development coordinator through the Department of Internal Affairs Community Development Scheme. This was successful and in November 2010, the Mataura Taskforce successfully appointed Jo Brand to help in the exciting journey of their community's growth.

What Jo discovered after a few months of researching, talking, reading, listening and learning was a community of amazing and diverse people who had made so much happen in such a short time. The work completed to this point by the Taskforce was outstanding, but key people were tired and overstretched. "In fact many were working so hard on the goals set by the town

during a Bliss Browne visioning day in 2009 they hadn't noticed how many of these goals were being achieved", says Jo.

For example, the initial reports (HNA 2008) by external agencies painted a fairly grim picture of Mataura, with a decile 1 school, health issues above the national average, educational engagement and employment figures performing lower than the national & regional numbers. Yet the work of the Taskforce (and several other community groups had cleverly taken different topics to develop and improve) was moving at such a fast pace those involved were unaware that their community had not only strengthened but was now moving towards a different level of needs. The community as a whole were engaged and ready to roll their sleeves up, contribute their input and valued their own solutions and strengths. Effectively the community groups had created a role change from being the operators to now needing to re-evaluate their part in the progress. The time was right for a new role within the project.

As Jim Diers writes in *Neighbour Power* (2004), 'connectors' are critical pieces of the community-led development puzzle. They take initiative, make links, help dilute barriers and enable synergies. In Mataura, having a dedicated full time resource to connect and develop helped to bring the entire picture into focus. Local groups began to see and enjoy the success they had achieved, to appreciate Southland's amazing support structures (Our Mayor, Gore District Council and Community Trust of Southland) and to critically evaluate previous project work in order to inform the next stage of the journey as a community. The Taskforce has now become a support mechanism, a champion of the community and a consultant to many of the projects now being undertaken to further improve Mataura as a place to live.

And this approach has yielded amazing, and sometimes unexpected results. For example, the community garden was created to help locals stretch their budgets and enjoy healthier nutrition. By late 2010 it was not only was receiving up to 60 visitors on 'Saturday gold coin for a bag of veges day' but also had over 40 volunteers. Community Garden Leader Barbara Cunningham said, "We never factored the social enjoyment of like-minded gardeners being together and loving the chance to help others." Similarly, local primary school principal Susan Dennison said that in 2008 only one out of five of her new entrants were school ready but now, four years later four out of five are ready for school. This change is a direct result of the Taskforce subgroup for preschool education ensuring that there are educational activities for pre-schoolers five days a week.

Less tangible but hugely significant is that local groups are now more trusting of each other and less isolated and competitive against each other for funding streams. Collaboration between the community garden & community marae has seen fruit trees planted throughout public spaces as well as all local churches working together on community events such as Carols in the Park instead of several conflicting events. Even the main local employer and their employees are taking a reduction in wages to ensure the future of their plant, and the future of Mataura. These activities all demonstrate the effectiveness collaboration between groups brings and, through the dedicated resource that is Jo, a stronger relationship with the community board is helping to ensure the value of collaboration and community-led development is increasingly understood and recognised.

Mataura locals certainly understand. In 2012, they continue to look for new effective ways to engage with each other and demonstrate behaviours that contribute to a strong collaborative and caring community. Furthermore, now they also recognise and celebrate the distance that has been

covered in such a short time. New services such as meals on wheels, a local phone directory, a youth centre and new businesses created and delivered by locals are exciting and heart-warming.

Most importantly, perhaps, Mataura has learned that there is no magic idea to achieve goals. No one person is always right and sometimes things don't work, but talking in the community, seeking out everyone's ideas and opinions, demonstrating leaderful behaviour and trusting that everyone's intentions are positive will result in an amazing solution, project or a new exciting option. The Mataura community has now begun to embrace tolerance, understanding and listening and understands that these actions contribute to the wellbeing of Mataura.

"We have opportunities in our community and we know we can achieve anything; there will be a solution somewhere from a local citizen and that there are many shoulders to the wheel", says Jo. "Local collaboration, regional and national networks and a can do attitude will ensure our future, improve our lives and grow community spirit."

Key Learnings:

Ask questions and listen properly, look for the strengths and ensure your community is aware of their strengths and celebrate them.

Key outcomes:

Community confidence to trust their own ability and wisdom which creates a culture of successful attitudes.

Contact:

Jo Brand
mcdc@cnt.org.nz
0211937720

Reference:

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Story by Jo Brand.

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