

13 April 2025

Attn:

Representation Commission

Re:

Objection to Proposed Electorate Boundary Changes

Palmerston North, Rangitikei and Wairarapa Electorates

Objector:

Brent Barrett, Palmerston North

My Objection & Reasons

This Objection is raised in my personal capacity, although I understand it generally aligns with the Objection filed by Palmerston North City Council and Objections filed by many of my constituents, especially those residing in Ashhurst.

Serving as a Palmerston North City Councillor since 2016, and residing in this community from 2000 onwards, I am closely familiar with the areas in consideration at the nexus of the proposed Palmerston North, Rangitikei and Wairarapa Electorate boundaries, and in particular the village of Ashhurst within Palmerston North City and other rural villages within the city boundary including Linton, Longburn and Bunnythorpe.

I am strongly supportive of the revision of the Palmerston North Electorate to include most of the people within the City of Palmerston North, and desirous that it should include all the people within the city. In particular the inclusion of Summerhill and Aokautere is welcome as these are urban and peri-urban communities, strongly connected within the city.

I understand that under census data, current modelling forecasts and assumptions, the Palmerston North Electorate is unable to accommodate all residents of the city and remain within the 5% threshold, and that this may have contributed in part to the surprising proposal to reassign Ashhurst from the Rangitīkei Electorate to the Wairarapa Electorate.

Wairarapa is and has only ever been places and peoples east of the Ruahine and Tararua Ranges. As such the proposal to consign Ashhurst to the Wairarapa is a major deviation from accepted places, communities and connections including political connections that have been in place since the inception of democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

While recognising the complexity of the challenges faced by the Representation Commission, I strongly object to the proposed assignment of Ashhurst to the Wairarapa electorate.

My reasons to object include

Existing Electorate Boundaries

The present inclusion of Ashhurst in Rangitīkei enables residents to access in person electorate office services in Feilding, relatively close at 15 - 20 minutes by car, and within an hour by bus via Palmerston North.

While technically possible that a Wairarapa MP could invest in basing delivery of electorate office services in Ashhurst or even Woodville, such services are very much more likely to be sited in Masterton or further into southern Wairarapa. This places such services over an hour one way by car, and practically inaccessible by public transport.

As such, the proposed assignment of Ashhurst to Wairarapa substantially disadvantages residents of Ashhurst in terms of access to electorate office services relative to options retaining their political voice on the west of the ranges..

Communities of Interest

Ashhurst residents generally enjoy a markedly stronger affinity and connection to communities within Palmerston North and Manawatū than to communities in the Wairarapa. This includes but is not limited to family, social, employment, health, education, recreation and cultural connections. There are no general cases where Ashhurst residents have stronger connections east to Wairarapa communities than to Palmerston North and Manawatū.

These western connections are reinforced by Ashhurst being within Palmerston North City boundaries for Local Government elections, and formerly being within Manawatū District Council boundaries.

Ashhurst has no history of formal political connection with Wairarapa at the Local or Parliamentary level. From what I hear from constituents, there is no desire to begin one now.

As such, the proposed assignment of Ashhurst to Wairarapa substantially diminishes Ashhurst residents' connection to their strongest communities of interest.

Infrastructure that links communities, such as roads and bridges

While Te Ahu a Turanga replacement for the Gorge Road is relatively safe and accessible as the fresh State Highway 3 segment linking east - west over the southern fringe of the Ruahine Ranges, it still leaves Ashhurst quite separate from the Wairarapa.

The cost and time and effort to get from Ashhurst to Palmerston North or Feilding is generally less than the effort required to get into populated places in the Wairarapa.

There are no regional public transport services linking Ashhurst to Wairarapa. There are adequate public transport services and many more road network options for

Ashhurst residents to access neighbouring communities in Palmerston North and Manawatū.

As such, the proposed assignment of Ashhurst to Wairarapa runs substantially counter to the balance of physical and especially transport infrastructure and linkages.

Topographic features such as mountains and rivers

Ashhurst is on the west side of the Ruahine and Tararua ranges, as is the rest of Palmerston North and Manawatū. This strongly reinforces Ashhurst's depth and diversity of connections in these communities.

Wairarapa as a place has only ever referred to the geographic places east of the Ruahine and Tararua ranges. Until this proposal, the political geography has matched the physical geography. Extension of the political construct of Wairarapa to absorb Ashhurst would be a substantial violation of the natural geography and physical and social structures of the areas concerned. It would be akin to the absorption of Wanaka into West Coast - Tasman, or of Upper Hutt into Wairarapa. It simply makes no sense.

As such, the proposed assignment of Ashhurst to Wairarapa runs counter to the clear geographic east-west boundary of the Tararua and Ruahine axial ranges.

My Suggested Solutions

It is recognised that the nexus of the proposed Palmerston North, Rangitīkei and Wairarapa Electorate boundaries is complex. The best solution is one that works within the 5% threshold, recognises and upholds the historically significant identity of Wairarapa as a place and political entity wholly east of the Ruahine and Tararua axial ranges, recognises the unity of Palmerston North and our rural villages as a single political entity, and minimises disruption to current constituencies in the Rangitīkei electorate.

Thus, in descending order of preference:

The most preferred solution is to revisit population forecast assumptions such that the new Palmerston North electorate boundary maps perfectly to the current Palmerston North city boundary.

This would include Ashhurst, Bunnythorpe, Longbun and Linton in Palmerston North Electorate.

Census data and derived projections and forecasts are subject to error and uncertainty. Thus, there should be close consideration of relaxing certain assumptions and forecasts to enable complete matching of these two political boundaries.

This would make clear and simple the local government and electorate alignment for purposes of responding to constituent needs at Local Government and Electorate levels, and contribute to a strong sense of connection and identity for people of Palmerston North. In the most extreme case risk it would only a very minor dilution of the representation and voting power of constituents in Palmerston North, a price well worth paying in exchange for the benefits outlined above.

The second most preferred solution is to bring Ashhurst into Palmerston North Electorate and retain Bunnythorpe, Longburn and/or Linton in the Rangitīkei Electorate. All four of these satellite communities of Palmerston North are currently in Rangitīkei electorate. This solution would retain the status quo for Bunnythorpe, Longburn and/or Linton and recognises their generally strong connection to Manawatū. It leverages the accessibility of electorate office services via their likely ongoing delivery in Feilding and Levin. If applied, the Commission should seek to bring with Ashhurst as many of the satellite rural communities of Linton, Longburn and Bunnythorpe into the Palmerston North electorate as possible.

The least preferred solution is to retain Ashhurst in the Rangitikei Electorate. While viable, this is the least preferred given Ashhurst's close connections to Palmerston North, inclusion in Palmerston North at the local government level, and the proximity and accessibility to Palmerston North compared to Feilding in particular with regard to public transport services. This solution appears quite simple to achieve, likely requiring only some re-forecasting of population trends and/or some revision of the proposed new southern and possibly northern border of Rangitīkei to remain within the 5% threshold.

Notably, each of the three of these solutions address the most substantial concern within my Objection by retaining Ashhurst in an electorate west of the ranges, thereby preventing Ashhurst from being assigned to the Wairarapa Electorate.

Thank you to the Representation Commission for taking the time to read and consider this Objection. I look forward to speaking with the authorities on these matters in due course, including any further concerns or solutions that may eventuate.

ENDS