

Report to Te Ahu Trust Board on review: 12 – 13 November 2009
Dame Cheryll Sotheran DNZM

Summary:

In conducting this review, I am very conscious that I had only limited time to consult and discuss the project with the wide range of stakeholders and community interested parties. I did read all the literature and documentation provided from a range of sources, but most particularly from the Far North District Council. However I do need to provide a disclaimer, that this is snapshot response to the Te Ahu project, albeit from an informed perspective given my 35 year involvement in the cultural sector, facility development and management and economic development.

In providing this summary to my report, I have not gone to the point of making formal recommendations. However I am happy to do so should the Trust Board find that helpful.

- Overall, the concept and vision for Te Ahu is robust and aspirational, and represents a powerful opportunity for social, cultural and economic growth in Kaitia and the Far North region. The concept of the narratives and culture of the seven peoples is powerful and innovative. It is certainly powerful enough to drive an ambitious supporting concept around convergence and integration
- While the project is primarily community focussed, the authenticity and cultural distinctiveness guaranteed by this approach will be a powerful element in also making Te Ahu a strong contributor to the local and national economy through tourism. New Zealand's tourism strategy for the future needs to focus on high value, high quality tourism products and services that offer a discriminating and non-price-sensitive visitor authentic and vivid experiences. Te Ahu in its concept and vision offers precisely that. In practical terms, this means that although the up-front investment for this community is high, the return on investment is potentially very good over time.
- The location and concept design for the project present strong advantages. The physical location offers very good access, and opportunity for future expansion. The building design is strong and visually appropriate and striking, and has a powerful local flavour.
- Some aspects of the concept have the capability of providing a benchmark for other local economies throughout New Zealand, particularly around the advanced interpretation of integration of activities and services under a single brand and with a single and singular vision.
- There is already impressive evidence of community support for the concept and the project. However there are some areas of tension within the stakeholder group for the project, which may reflect tensions in the wider community, that need to be resolved. The tensions that have emerged between various stakeholder groups are healthy in the context that they reveal a community that is capable of thinking deeply about its heritage and its future.

However it is possible for these tensions to be unproductive and to hinder the implementation of the concept and vision, if they remained focussed on issues of historic power and control – of heritage collections, of knowledge, of community stories.

- The concept and vision offers an outstanding opportunity for innovative design, although the design agenda should be driven by the totality of the integrated proposal, and not by discrete parts of it, such as the art/carving programme. It is essential that Te Ahu gets the design team right, in order to ensure that world class thinking and creativity are central to the designed experience.
- The concept and vision clearly must be carried right through to an integrated approach to governance, management and operations. If this does not occur, there is a real risk that the new opportunities offered by such an exciting integrated model will rapidly dissipate into old-style territories that do not complement each other and do not tell a compelling and unified story to the community.
- This is a very ambitious project for Kaitaia and the Far North by any standards. However resources will be an issue and the funding requirements are challenging. In that context, the concept and vision should be tightly focussed on the components that have been identified within the current model, and the temptation to include more and more elements firmly resisted. The concept of Te Ahu as a “hub” with strongly aligned but independent “spoke” activity across the region will be very useful in maintaining this focus.
- The project has shown innovation and strength in assembling a good mix of local and New Zealand expertise in realising the concept to this point. This approach needs to be continued across the delivery and into the operational phase of the project. The consultants who have been brought into the team have all given good value, and will be a cost-effective way of ensuring the project meets all its targets and standards, including financial ones. Having said that, a healthy injection at appropriate points of review by the Te Ahu Trust on behalf of stake holders will always be helpful in maintaining rigour.
- The new human resource model for Te Ahu will need to be capable of operationalising the brand values so vital to the successful realisation of this project.

Structure of the Review:

In conducting the review, I addressed the following areas:

- Concept and vision
- Location
- Design

- The integrated model
- Branding for the Te Ahu project
- Resources and funding

Concept and Vision

The concept of the narratives and culture of the seven peoples is powerful and innovative. It is certainly powerful enough to drive an ambitious supporting concept around convergence and integration. Such a concept can bring the community ownership and commitment the project needs. It can also be the means by which an apparently disparate set of activities previously dispersed across the physical territory of the community are brought together in a place which will come to be the place where the community lives all aspects of their lives – whether that be taking care of their daily living requirements, gaining knowledge in a variety of ways, finding inspiration and challenge through narratives and treasures, socialising and forming new networks and understandings, celebrating great occasions, and marking great events. The Seven Peoples concept ensures that the life that is lived in this place is truly representative of the whole community which owns it.

Having acknowledged the breadth and innovation of this vision, it is necessary to recognise that this is an ambitious project by any standard, and will represent a very large investment on the part of the community. In order to realise the vision and ensure a good return on the investment, it is essential that the vision stays focussed on the group of functions and activities that have been identified as components of the integrated experience. The temptation to include more and more elements should be firmly resisted as this will put at risk the focus of the project and also the community's ability to fund and sustain it. The use of a "hub and spoke" model for Te Ahu will ensure that partnerships and networks can be developed with other activities and businesses in the region that will eventually provide a rich Far North experience for both the community and tourists, with Te Ahu acting as a portal.

Many communities take a purely bricks and mortar approach to the provision of new facilities. That this community has established the vision first, and sees the bricks and mortar as merely the vehicle of a unifying vision for the whole community is a great tribute to its wisdom and resourcefulness.

Location:

The physical location for Te Ahu has a number of strong advantages. It has good visibility and access; that it is not in the CBD is not a disadvantage in a smaller centre. The opportunities for future expansion and/or the development of associated community activities are good.

Design

The concept design for the building is strong, and has an excellent local flavour. The brief to the architects has resulted in a design that is fit for the purpose of creating an integrated experience within it. There remains the issue of ensuring that the new

building is fully integrated with the existing community theatre/hall facilities that also need to be integrated with the Te Ahu experience. I did not see much evidence that this aspect has yet been thought through or included in the design work.

The new building represents premium space, which is well reflected in the design. Premium space is that directly used by the visitor, and the key requirements within this project are:

- Openness and accessibility: a real sense of welcome both in the architectural design and the nature of the staff engagement with the visitor
- Seamless merging of experiences across the “living at Te Ahu” model
- At the same time, clarity of the nature of the experience the visitor is moving through, in order to make it as easy as possible to meet the visitor’s need
- No space allocated for “back of house activity” unless that has a strong point of engagement with the visitor and/or the experience
- As much resource going into ensuring maximum technological and physical flexibility of the building as possible

Functions that are not directly accessed by the visitor, such as heritage collections, can be located away from the main building complex but still on or near the proposed site in purpose built facilities. I understand that this is a real possibility for the Te Ahu project, and I think it should be actively pursued. The former museum and library collections represent a valuable asset for the experiential aspect of the project, and as such should be cared for appropriately. However such collections also represent a cost; the return on the community’s investment in housing and maintaining these collections will only be realised if the collections are assessed for the real value they will bring to the project. There is a very good opportunity in the context of the Te Ahu project to conduct an audit of the existing heritage collections to determine where that return on the community investment might be.

In terms of the design of the visitor experience within the new building, integration is clearly the driving force. The power of the over-arching concept of the stories of the seven peoples, combined with the opportunities offered by a new paradigm that combines service, knowledge, heritage and celebration in a single living model for the community gives a magnificent opportunity for innovative and cutting edge design. The project needs design that is truly world class, not in terms of the quantum of funding that can realistically be applied to it, but in the qualities of innovation, imagination, technological inventiveness and creativity that will be brought to it by the right design team. This team needs to understand profoundly what innovative design means in the 21st century global field of experience design, and be able to translate that into this local community’s aspirations and expectations. It is critical that Te Ahu gets this team right. It is well worth expending time and effort on this now, as this will be what makes Te Ahu truly memorable, what will bring the community to it in the first place, and will keep it returning until Te Ahu truly becomes the place “where people live”.

The Integrated Model

This is the aspect of this project that offers the most innovation and excitement. It is what sets it apart from other projects which simply seek to locate disparate functions and activities into a single space, but do not explore and exploit the huge opportunity to offer visitors a seamless approach that reflects their daily lives, needs, aspirations and celebrations.

Should the Te Ahu project be able to fully realise this project as a true convergence opportunity, in its architectural design, its governance and organisational design, its human face to the visitor in the form of well-trained and truly customer focussed staff, and its single powerful brand presented to the local and national community, it will be a benchmark for New Zealand.

To achieve this, there needs to be a whole- hearted commitment by the key stakeholders, the Far North District Council and the Te Ahu Trust, to take the necessary steps at this stage of the project to achieve integration. Single governance and management would be the ideal solution, but at the very least a very close alignment of FNDC services delivery and the knowledge and experience related aspects of the Te Ahu project needs to be achieved. In that context, it seems to be to be critical that the former museum, library and information elements of the project need to be brought together under the singular vision of Te Ahu, and operated seamlessly within the physical facility. That will require an integrated operating plan that takes a more innovative approach to revenue generation than the crude measure of charging for one part of the experience. A spend- per- head approach across the whole experience has been proved to work elsewhere and is a robust model for the Te Ahu project.

It is not surprising that the Te Ahu project has been at the forefront of community interest, as it is inherently both exciting and challenging. The tensions that have emerged between various stakeholder groups are healthy in the context that they reveal a community that is capable of thinking deeply about its heritage and its future. However it is possible for these tensions to be unproductive and to hinder the implementation of the concept and vision, if they remained focussed on issues of historic power and control – of collections, of knowledge, of community stories. The Te Ahu project is a real opportunity to do what many communities have failed to do – to cast off old and constrained territories, and forge a new and integrated life-reflecting model for the Far North.

Branding for the Te Ahu project

The world's most powerful brands are driven by the set of values that underpin them. Te Ahu will be no exception. Its value of community focus, emerging from the heritage and stories of the seven peoples that populate the region and expressed through an innovative integrated model, will drive a powerful brand. Other values implicit in this brand will encompass welcome, accessibility, openness, and customer

service. It is essential that the brand truly reflect the integrated nature of the project, which means in practice that all sub brands that have emerged from the convergence of the various stake holder groups must subsume to the Te Ahu brand. This in turn will only be achieved if the integration necessary to the project is played out through governance and management. A single brand needs a single team delivery, or there is a real risk of a dysfunctional relationship between the brand, the underpinning values and the delivery of the project.

Resources and funding

This is an ambitious project in terms of the financial resources that will be required to deliver it to its full potential. Further, the scale of the budget dictates that good project management expertise will be essential in ensuring the project meets its time and budget targets. The expert consultant the Trust has currently employed to set out a financial plan including fund raising has a proven track record of success and brings an appropriate level of rigour and realism to the project, and can be seen as an asset to the project as it progresses. It will be important to match that expertise with excellent project management; slippage on time and budget will be very damaging for this project in the local community.

The project has been conceived of as a community based initiative. However this approach guarantees a degree of authenticity and a cultural distinctiveness that will contribute greatly to its success as a tourist attraction. New Zealand's tourism industry needs high value products and services that focus on memorable experiences, and this is the Te Ahu promise and offering. In practical terms, this will give a potentially high return over time on the high initial investment the community will make to the project.

How realistic is the fundraising target for this project? If the Trust can resolve the stakeholder issues, while holding true to the visionary concept for Te Ahu, the offering to a potential sponsor or donor will be very attractive. The benefits associated with such an innovative, benchmark project, with such positive community perception and potential levels of visitation will be obvious to corporate sponsors and donors alike. However the fund raising campaign needs an integrated and visionary product to offer, and a governance and management approach that minimises risk from poorly managed stakeholder or community expectations.

I was not able to gather enough information to make informed comment on human resource for the project, other than to confirm that the external expertise currently being employed seems to be making a very good contribution overall to the project. The new human resource model will however need to reflect the essential brand values:

- Demonstrating an integrated approach to delivering products and services
- Customer focussed
- Driven by the spirit of welcome/ manaakitanga
- Inclusive and accessible.