

FREEDOM CAMPING

This submission is personal and represents my view as an individual ratepayer of Marlborough.

I am opposed to Freedom Camping for overseas tourists touring NZ in vehicles as the cost of this activity, borne by ratepayers, is significant while the assumed benefits do not exist. There is growing evidence that the statement *Freedom Campers stay longer and spend more overall* is not true. What is known is that by subsidising the travel costs of these campers that some accommodation businesses have been placed under extreme pressure as their market is eroded (in most cases between 35-40% decrease on top of several bad post-earthquake years).

Freedom Campers are a growing group within NZ Inbound Tourism yet there is no current strategy that suggests this group should be increased. The Strategies that do exist have no mention of traveller subsidy and focus on increasing revenue through higher value Tourists. This is what we, as a region, need to focus on as Covid-19 impacts more and more on local SME's.

The views that I am expressing below are intended to point out that decisions made about Freedom Camping have for the most part been informed by misinformation. MDC is again reviewing its bylaw and I understand gathering more data to support decisions. Through this process there is an opportunity to gain a better understanding of where costs and benefits actually are. I will submit to the Bylaw Review, but believe that it is important to signal my desire for Council to cease funding any activity associated with providing freedom campers more space or infrastructure through the Annual Plan process.

Who Freedom Camps

Most New Zealanders will probably admit to free camping at some time in their past but a visit to one of Marlborough's sites will show the majority of users in summer are foreign, young and travel NZ in unbranded vehicles. As a commercial operator I am exposed to the entitlement that drives attitudes of many Freedom Campers. There is actually a language change creeping in when visitors introduce themselves, by telling me their van / car is self-contained, as if it means something to a business like mine. The big issue is that we have a user pays society so why are we undermining commercial operators and duplicating their facilities which already cater for travellers?

The NZMCA which has been a key proponent for Free Camping for their members have developed their own opportunities to reduce member costs and their contribution to the Tourism industry is cost/benefit neutral regardless of the way regional bylaws are established.

Is There A Capacity Issue?

The original legislation was connected to a perceived lack of capacity during the Lions Tour (two ago). This was ill-conceived at the time as any council can allow temporary facilities for specified times and this can still occur when Tourism businesses do have a capacity problem which would be approximately a week a year (normally 25 Dec through to 5 January).

Effect on Business

MDC licences several businesses which are being directly affected by the increasing numbers who are taking the free option.

Backpackers/Hostels, Holiday Parks and some Motels are now gaining considerably less revenue while industry evidence does not suggest those saving on accommodation are spending these savings with activity operators or supporting other regional business.

Effect on Communities and their Environment

There seems to be a growing change in attitude from communities who have a Freedom Camping Site adjacent to their properties. Free camping areas have removed recreation and rest areas from locals and there are a growing number of unpleasant social and health and safety interactions happening amongst Freedom Campers and towards residents who must live with this on their front doorstep. For many Sounds residents, their whole reason for purchasing a home or holiday property has been soured by the impact of the freedom camping site development close by.

Our environment is vulnerable and under stress. Tourism operators have been and can be the champions for our natural environment.

Commercial properties care for the environment, give back to the sustainability of a community and already have high quality health and safety mechanisms in place to ensure guests and local residents do not incur costs or risk of disease.

Cost to Ratepayers

Ratepayers are calculated to be paying **\$17.53** for each van/car per night Freedom Camping in Marlborough based on:

- The cost of enforcement/ policy/ amenities and admin staff who administer Freedom Campsites
- Security Company contracts for enforcement.
- Developing, marking and maintaining parking spaces
- Enhancing and replacing signage.
- The Cost and depreciation of constructing toilet and rubbish facilities (above the \$670 k the Government has funded)
- Site and amenities cleaning contracts.
- Increased Rubbish collection and 'clean up' contracts
- Unsorted and uncompacted rubbish.
- Loss of clean rest areas for road travellers.

We know as Park operators that it costs over \$30 per van/car (assuming two occupants) to provide a Holiday Park service with the required amenities and this does not include our time.

It is unlikely that Council will receive any further funding for toilets, etc from Central Government for freedom camping spots as this money will be withdrawn and used to fund benefits, etc post the Covid-19 fall out.

Benefit

The belief that Freedom Campers stay longer and spend more overall has been disproved. MBIE have been challenged about the inaccuracy of their analysis and it is no longer shown on their Web Site. Tasman District Council commissioned a consultant to report on Freedom Campers recently and the findings were clear that many FC reported they are spending what amounts to nothing on activities and as little as possible on food, fuel, and alcohol.

We should understand what sectors in our economy benefit from these travellers. From what studies are suggesting: supermarkets, fuel stations, and some Car/ Van Rental Companies are the only beneficiaries. We need to be careful to discern between travellers who are spending and support our tourism businesses verses those who expect New Zealanders to fund their stay. A worrying trend is the number of affluent travellers who now expect to stay in NZ for free, alongside their Campermate using, slider-van counterparts.

Why?

Why are we subsidising travellers who add little benefit to our tourism economy and in effect to our regional economy? It is certainly not a strategic goal for Tourism NZ and there is some evidence that the low-cost traveller we are attracting into NZ is no longer interested in contributing to our traditional seasonal worker requirements. As a commercial operator I get very irritated when I receive comments suggesting Holiday Parks and Backpackers are overcharging. Perhaps Council can shed light on what Freedom Campers are costing the Ratepayer. This should be supported by some robust analysis to understand what all this actually achieves, the harm we are allowing and why we are encouraging low return tourism and using ratepayers money to undermine businesses who support their local community.

Covid-19 has already had the huge impact of forcing some high-profile tourism (and other) businesses to close. To allow the freedom camping sites to remain open will have the inevitable effect of closing more tourism/accommodation businesses as they simply cannot compete with free. Freedom camping is an unsustainable and unnecessary drain on businesses which, if they survive at all, will be struggling for the next few years. Please support local businesses and allow our economy to get up and running again!