



REDnews

“Zombie town” Whanganui still alive and kicking

Karen Silk Posted 27 January 2015



Panorama Wanganui from Durie Hill April 2012 by Georgwille, licenced under CC BY-SA 3.0, via Commons.wikimedia.org.

I was born and raised in Whanganui and a substantial number of my extended family still live there now, so I feel somewhat qualified to offer an opinion on current criticism of my home town.

Recent comments that small towns such as Whanganui are in danger of becoming "zombie towns" and aren't worth investing in, largely ignore the social value and role that smaller communities offer in supporting not only regional economic needs, but also in offering individual choice.

Last time I looked, Queen Street and Lambton Quay didn't look like an ideal place to graze sheep and cows or grow crops. In a digital world many businesses and individuals don't require access to large populations on their doorstep to be profitable and successful. Therefore they have the increasing luxury of being able to avoid the hassles and expense of large city living as a result of the lifestyle on offer in smaller regional communities.

Whanganui has many great amenities on offer as a result of local leadership and a community desire to create an environment where citizens have access to resources that support lifestyle quality. As a community, it has demonstrated an ability to evolve and expand beyond a centre serving a large agricultural catchment area. Tourism (based on its long history and the river), a long history of sporting achievement (Peter Snell broke four minutes for the mile at Cook Gardens), and significant sporting facilities, plus a thriving artistic community attract visitors to the city.

Whanganui, for the third year running, has been named as one of the world's Smart21 Intelligent Communities as a result of the work undertaken by the Whanganui Digital Leaders Forum, enabling digital businesses to establish within the city. Whanganui is the only community in New Zealand to have ever been included on this list.

Both secondary school and tertiary education opportunities mirror those on offer in larger cities. My own secondary school (Wanganui High School) is regularly on the list of top regional schools, and the fantastic Massey University is less than an hour away.

As a regular returnee over the years, my children in their younger years gained as much joy from Kowhai Park as I did at the same age, and the city was our base when teaching our children to ski on Ruapehu.

As they grew older we migrated to extended family holidays rafting the Rangitikei River, and canoeing the upper reaches of the Whanganui River, and after watching Katie Brown blowing glass at the Chronicle Glass Gallery earlier this year we are now planning to participate in one of their weekend courses in 2015.

I take pride in being born and raised in Whanganui. Many of the values I ask my team to embrace, in particular collaboration, were instilled in me growing up in an environment where community needs were met by community effort. We win not as a group of individuals, but as a result of the work we do together, a value regularly exhibited in regional New Zealand.

Whanganui is not a centre waiting to be ground down; instead its people are grounded, the option it provides for lifestyle and community are unique and there is not a zombie to be found.

