

Heading into the digital era

The Wanganui District Council's digital facilitator, **MARIANNE ARCHIBALD**, writes about what it might mean for our district if the Wanganui Rural Community Board works with the Intelligent Community Forum on the Rural Imperative Scheme



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skills at marketing themselves to the world and advocating for change within the community.

Remember too, through the eyes of those who live in cities of 500,000-plus, the urban area of Whanganui is also considered “rural” which means the Rural Imperative Scheme is important to all of us.

So what does the Rural Imperative mean, in real terms, for our district?

That’s something for us to decide and navigate through as technology changes.

The main thing is how to bridge the gap between the opportunities of living in the rural area (natural beauty, open spaces, cheaper land and good community values) with the challenges (the population isn’t as dense, the proximity of other like-minded people may be less, the employment is harder to come across and it can take longer, and cost more, to get together for social or business meetings).

The Rural Imperative Project aims to maximise the effect the broadband economy can have on making rural areas as vital and exciting places to grow a business or build a career as a busy city centre. All of this is possible in an economy and culture that is conducted increasingly online.

We are not sure yet how this may happen but where better to start than Whanganui, which is already leading the way in 100 per cent connectivity, with the support of the Rural Community Board?

MANY of you will know that our district has been recognised as a Smart21 Intelligent Community by the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) for three years running for our work on building a leading edge and globally connected district.

The ICF is an international think tank which awards communities around the world every year for making the most of the broadband economy.

Out of the 21 communities selected, seven are picked for the Top7 and eventually one is named Intelligent Community of the Year.

Whanganui is the only community in New Zealand to reach Smart21 status. As such, we have been contacted by community leaders in Kapiti, Te Awamutu, Nelson, Auckland and even Denmark to share what we know and give advice on how they too can become

Intelligent Communities.

The rural sector has contributed its fair share toward achieving this international benchmark.

Rural Community Board Deputy Chairman David Matthews used the “Number 8 wire philosophy” to work with Inspire Net Ltd to get his Parapara neighbours connected to fixed wireless broadband using a fishing rod and an old water pipe. He then went on to get much of the rest of remote Whanganui connected, winning a national award for this work.

Other rural initiatives, such as the work Chorus has done to connect nine schools in the peri-urban area to 100mb/s fibre, as part of the Rural Broadband Initiative, is also a factor. Already in the rural areas of our district, 120 fixed wireless broadband repeaters are up and running, serving nine rural schools and more than 1000 households.

But the rural sector has much to offer and learn as we move into an online future and the Wanganui Rural Community Board will play an important role through the Intelligent Community Forum’s Rural Imperative Scheme.

Since 2010, ICF has partnered with the Blandin Foundation, based in Minnesota, US, to ensure that rural communities involved in the Intelligent Community Forum are up to a standard which fits with the density and scale of rural communities. These standards including measuring broadband penetration and costs, educational performance, digital inclusion, innovation by business and government, and the communities’