

**Possible Submissions on RMA Amendment (Simplifying and Streamlining) Bill**  
**11 March 2009**

The Urban Design Forum of New Zealand (UDF NZ) welcomes the opportunity to comment on proposed changes to the Resource Management Act (RMA).

UDF NZ sees the quality and functionality of our towns as cities as critical to the economic and social wellbeing of our country. The RMA and associated regional and district plans are important (but far from the only) tools in shaping urban environments. Urban design-based theory and practice promotes an approach to city planning that is more forward looking, integrative and place-based than most current plans prepared under the RMA, while urban design also promotes a more qualitative assessment of new development, focusing on how it fits its context and promotes liveable, vibrant urban environments, rather than just the avoidance or mitigation of adverse affects on the environment.

It is acknowledged that the RMA is a flexible piece of legislation which allows for considerable scope at the local level for communities and councils to define future outcomes and to develop a range of tools to achieve these outcomes. This includes scope to introduce into plans some of the common tools used in urban design, for example place-based plans like master plans and design-based assessment processes. However uptake of urban design-based approaches in district plans has been slow due to a number of mandate and capacity issues.

The changes proposed to the RMA should generally support the on-going introduction of urban design-based approaches into District Plans. This includes:

- the greater scope for Council's to determine planning policy for their area (removal of general appeal right on plan review / change decisions) and as a result more confidence to incorporate design-based outcomes and methods into plans where the community wish to head in this direction;
- moves to increase professionally trained decision makers in consent processes who will be more able to understand the many trade-offs involved in developing sustainable urban areas (independent Hearing Commissioners); and
- the reduction of submission rights focused on protecting at any cost existing - and often privately enjoyed - features and characteristics of a built environment (amended provisions relating to public notification).

These changes, well implemented, will help to create a better framework within which urban design based approaches can be developed and put into effect.

However good design outcomes for developers, councils and communities will not just come about from streamlining current approaches. We need to fundamentally shift the focus of resource management for towns and cities from a perspective of protection of the natural environment and current amenity and character to one that is much more forward looking (attaining high quality future environments, which includes protection where necessary of existing features, but also creative of new environments) and integrative of all the various costs and benefits involved in change and development within cities.

This will require new skills and capacities. The issue of implementation is as important as the issue of legislative mandate. To this end, we note with dismay that urban affairs seems to have been downplayed by the current government. The Government has no obvious “city agenda” which is in stark contrast to other OECD countries. The lack of such an agenda does not augur well for a more sophisticated approach to the management of towns and cities, including amendments to the legislation that sets the general direction.

We therefore look forward to the signaled second phase of changes to the RMA where we expect urban issues in general and urban design in particular to be tackled comprehensively, as well as on-going involvement of central government in urban management and change.

#### About UDF

The Urban Design Forum NZ (UDF NZ) has, since 2000, worked to promote good urban design in NZ. Modelled loosely on similar groups in Australia and England, UDF is supported by the New Zealand Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Engineering and Surveying Institutes'. The purpose of the Forum is to promote cross-disciplinary understanding of urban design amongst urban professionals, to raise awareness generally at the national and local levels of the benefits of urban design and to provide a forum for discussion of design-based approaches that are relevant to the development and management of New Zealand towns and cities. Membership is open to anyone interested in urban design and includes planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, surveyors and other professionals, together with politicians, academics, developers and individuals. The organisation is run entirely by volunteers, with administration assistance from the New Zealand Planning Institute.