

## **A Brief History of Living Streets Aotearoa**

Living Streets Aotearoa is New Zealand's advocacy organisation for people on foot.

From the first steps of WalkWellington in 1998, through incorporation in 2002, 2004's inaugural conference, and a full-time director in 2005, we've grown to five staff, several contractors and many volunteers in 2008. It's been a busy decade and worth reflecting upon.

New Zealand is a fascinating ethnic mix with Maori, the first people of New Zealand, strong Scottish, English and Irish settlement to more recent immigrants and refugees from Polynesia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas. Unfortunately many of our cities have followed the path of sprawl and North American car dependency. We have four million people spread through islands with a land mass comparable to the UK. Due to its topographical constraints, the small capital – Wellington – has relatively good walkability. Nevertheless, it's certainly not perfect and its imperfections sparked a desire for change.

In 1998, several people at a Road Safety meeting realised that while motorists, professional engineers and cyclists all had an advocacy voice in transport, there was none for pedestrians. Key people in the call for a pedestrian advocacy group included Ina Smart, a cheerful woman with severe visual impairment, someone from Public Health, someone working in the corporate car driving industry and myself! I'm a City Councillor and at that time I was chairing the Road Safety Sub-committee and growing more aware of the silence of pedestrians. So we contacted the media who do free "community event" notices and had a good turn-out at our first meeting, forming **WalkWellington**. An early project, funded by the City Council's Road Safety Coordinator's budget, was the production of Yellow Feet saying "Don't Tread on Our Toes" with some of the many reasons not to park on the footpath. Free meeting rooms at Council were helpful given zero budget. We held a few raffles and a treasure hunt – with the prize being "Bread for a Year" and were officially included on the Wellington City Council Road Safety Sub-committee. Small grants, again from the Council, plus modest sponsorship from local health organisations, such as Diabetes Wellington, enabled us to produce some local walking maps.

This Wellington group made various submissions to local and regional Councils while I spent the next couple of years in the UK. I enjoyed travelling the Sustrans routes and met the Living Streets UK people. I saw both huge traffic jams and excellent traffic calming schemes, and explored continental Europe by foot, bike, train and car. I'd been pondering the dreaded dullness of the word "pedestrian" and while "People on Foot" is a useful phrase, it isn't magnificently exciting either. Christchurch City Council had already done some traffic calming schemes and described them as Living Streets but the staff there weren't possessive about the name. Rather than setting up the "NZ Pedestrian Association", we learnt from the research done by Living Streets UK, They rebranded The Pedestrians Association formed in August 1929 – see

[http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/about\\_living\\_streets/living\\_streets\\_history.php](http://www.livingstreets.org.uk/about_living_streets/living_streets_history.php)

and I asked if they minded if we chose the same name. In my view “Living Streets” works better than “Walk X” because the emphasis is on the street rather than being mistaken for a rambling organisation.

Returning to NZ in early 2001, it was obvious that we needed to have input to national policy and access to central government policy-makers. For example, consultation on the draft National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Strategy demanded a nationwide walking response rather than a single city-based one. Therefore we set up a national organisation. We chose to be an incorporated society so we could apply for grants, have democratically elected governance and a membership structure. The constitution was debated at the founding meeting and has undergone modification since – to clarify our charitable status, our branch structure. We act as an umbrella so each branch doesn’t need to have audited accounts, a constitution and so forth, although some choose to become independent organisations.

A big step forward was our first conference in 2004. We have now had three conferences with some excellent local and international figures including walking gurus Rod Tolley and Dan Burden, transport visionary Todd Litman and physical activity researcher and advocate Brian Oldenberg. The contacts I’ve made through international conferences, email groups and the International Federation of Pedestrians have been invaluable.

We succeeded in getting Walking networking funding also in 2004, from the national government Transport Agency, through an intermediate organisation. If we hadn’t worked closely with the Cycle Advocates Network (CAN) we would never have been aware of the opportunity. They were keen to focus on cycling and not have “to advocate for walking too because nobody else was” and we have maintained very positive relationships while remaining separate. Cycling images and long-distance projects can overwhelm the smaller scale but more ubiquitous walking needs so I’ve been adamant that conferences and organisations remain separate. We work closely together so we are not divided against each other by other interest groups or agencies. While there are certainly conflicts between people on foot and cyclists, these are nowhere near as severe as those between active modes motorised vehicles. The need for separation in advocacy and planning deserves a separate article of its own! Several individuals are members of both organisations.

Special mention should be made of our current director in any potted history. Liz Thomas started as Director in 2005 and has brought the necessary attention to correct financial budgeting and staff employment issues, as well as becoming a passionate walking advocate herself. With her gentle guidance, and her inspired networking part-timers, we now have nine active local advocacy groups, plus two more setting up in the cities within Greater Auckland. Once a branch exists, that’s just the beginning – they need new blood, reminders about submissions, encouragement neither to take a single focus nor to try to do too much at once. With a new Projects Officer, we plan to boost our activities and broaden our funding base by taking on Street Reviews, Walking Maps and other projects that deliver walking benefits while covering their production costs.

Our governance is purely voluntary and without the commitment of a dozen stalwarts on the Living Streets Executive Council, we'd have ceased existence almost as soon as we started! It seems it's the busiest of our local and national advocates who also serve on our Council. The development of employment, health and safety, credit card limits, delegations, governance training and risk management policies takes considerable time and thought, let alone the attention to stakeholders, funders, projects, strategic planning and changing political landscapes. Each organisation is unique in the constitution and policies it needs and it's different from country to country. However, much can be borrowed and altered and we've drawn on the work of a number of other organisations. Community Net Aotearoa has some useful templates.

Over the years, health and the economy have arisen as matters equally important to road safety, congestion and accessibility. Walking's small carbon footprint should mean it's seen as a key contributor to Climate Protection but all too often the Think Big projects or technological fixes are preferred politically. We plan to revamp our website into a more orderly collection with a focus on the economic benefits of walking.

We exist to make *the invisible mode* visible – and audible – while enjoying each others' company, preferably on foot with pleasant refuelling stops!