

Message from our Mayor

Getting on with the Job...

A Mayoral Report from Scott Aronsen, Mackenzie District Mayor

A heads up for our Mackenzie residents and those of you asking - what are you doing ?

It's been a full on 5 months with barely time to catch our breath. After getting my and councilors feet under the table of the MDC and just starting to get some traction going forward, I received a phone call from Timaru hospital that I would be accepted for surgery on my ankle at the end of January. As I had been on the waiting list for some time I wasn't about to say no and jumped at the chance to get my ankle fixed. I underwent a major ankle fusion — a significant operation involving a rod inserted from the base of my foot up into the leg. It put me offline for close to six weeks and only just now starting to walk without crutches although there will be a few more weeks recovery yet. During that time, Deputy Mayor Rit Fisher stepped in and carried the reins - a job Rit did exceptionally well considering he had suffered a stroke just a few weeks earlier than my operation.



Over the past four months, this council has had to deal with a simple reality: we don't get to choose the environment we operate in, but we are responsible for how we respond to it.

Water reform has been forced onto every council in the country. We pushed hard to retain local control. That was our starting position. But once it became clear that model would not be accepted, we made the call to move forward with a joint approach alongside Timaru District.

That decision wasn't ideological — it was practical.

Our job is to ensure reliable, compliant, and affordable water services. Standing still and pretending we could ignore central government requirements would have been reckless. So we adjusted, and we moved.

For residents, nothing changes overnight. Your services continue. There is no sudden hit to your rates. But structurally, yes — this is a significant shift, and it's one we will manage carefully.



Working through the alternatives — and making the call

What hasn't been visible publicly is just how compressed and intensive the decision-making process has been behind the scenes in the water's space. While in the previous Triennium the process dragged on for months and council finally made the call to go alone, the DIA had alternative ideas.

At my first formal Mayoral forum meeting in Wellington, I was told by a DIA member we may have some issues. At the Canterbury Mayoral Forum in Christchurch a couple of weeks later - over a cup of coffee, we were politely told that it would be in the best interests for the Mackenzie District to amalgamate its water services with Timaru - and 'all our problems would go away'. It was pretty subtle but blunt as the DIA had decided that we weren't financially sustainable.

At council level after discussion with Timaru DC we readjusted our sites however...

At short notice, we were invited into discussions around a wider model with 'Southern Waters' — effectively an expanded arrangement involving multiple councils including Gore, Balclutha, Central Otago District, Waitaki, Timaru and the Mackenzie

This quickly became a programme of **back-to-back meetings over roughly six weeks**, from early in the new year through to March.

Councillors Rit Fisher and Mark Adams carried the bulk of that workload — travelling to Timaru, Oamaru, and Alexandra, working through the detail alongside other councils.

Southern Waters was already established and was clearly already departed from the station. The Mackenzie and Timaru Councils were late players to the table and we had some catching up to do. The Waitaki District Council had joined the conversation but there were obvious signs they had been in the conversation for a while.

While we made every effort to look at all potential angles of a 6 way council alignment there were a few red flags. Timaru District Council also had concerns .

In the end, we made a clear call.

That level of scale and alignment did not give us the confidence we needed. The governance, the distance, and the complexity all raised real concerns about losing local influence and control.

So we stood firm.

We confirmed our position to stay aligned with Timaru — a model we understand, a partner we can work with, and an arrangement that gives us a clearer line of sight over outcomes.

That decision wasn't rushed. It came out of a very intense period of work, and it was made deliberately. Discussions with Timaru DC are on going and we are well on the way to setting up a separate waters company outside of the normal runnings of both Timaru and Mackenzie District Councils. Shares will be owned by each respective council but this will be a stand alone identity.

Central government reform — and why it matters locally

Running alongside water reform is a much bigger shift coming from Wellington.

Central government is driving major reform of the planning system, replacing the Resource Management Act with new legislation aimed at simplifying rules, enabling development, and reshaping how land use is managed.

At the same time, wider local government reform signals a push toward consolidation, standardisation, and in some cases reduced local discretion.

Local Government New Zealand has been clear in its position:

- Reform is needed, particularly to enable infrastructure and housing
- But it must not come at the cost of local decision-making
- And it must be workable for smaller districts, not just large urban centres

Councillor Rit Fisher has been actively engaged in this space — attending Canterbury Mayoral Forum discussions and travelling to Wellington to engage directly on these reforms.

We are making sure the Mackenzie District is at the table — because these changes will directly affect how we plan, how we fund infrastructure, and how much control we retain locally.

While this started off with a hiss and a roar, discussion has settled a little as we wait for the outcome of the RMA reforms. Presently nobody knows where things will end up and we are in the hands of the Central government politicians.

Growth is real — and it needs to be managed properly

At the same time, we are dealing with very real pressure from tourism and short-term accommodation.

Between Twizel and Lake Tekapo, there are now **around 800 short-term rental listings** active on platforms like Airbnb at any given time. That is no longer a small, fringe activity — it is a major part of the local economy and a major user of local infrastructure.

Roading, water, wastewater, rubbish, public facilities — all of these are being used by visitors staying in those properties.

Here's the issue.

Council already has a **targeted tourism rate** designed specifically to recognise that commercial visitor accommodation places additional demand on infrastructure. That rate is being paid by hotels, motels, and some compliant operators.

But a significant number of short-term rental properties are **not contributing at that same level**.

That is not sustainable, and it is not fair.

It is not fair on:

- Local ratepayers who are effectively subsidising visitor use of infrastructure
- Traditional accommodation providers who are paying their share
- The district as a whole, which is carrying the cost without full recovery

There is another layer to this that cannot be ignored.

In parts of Lake Tekapo in particular, a number of these operations are no longer single dwellings being casually rented out. They are effectively **multi-unit visitor accommodation complexes operating within residential zones** — in practical terms, motels in all but name.

Many of these are operating **outside the intent of planning rules, building use classifications, and rating structures** that apply to formal accommodation providers.

That creates a double imbalance:

- They are not subject to the same regulatory framework
- They are not consistently paying the same level of rates

This isn't about shutting anything down. Short-term accommodation is part of the district now. It brings economic activity and supports local businesses.

But if you are operating what is, in effect, a commercial accommodation business — particularly at scale — then the rules need to apply, and the rating treatment needs to reflect that reality.

What needs to change

We are now looking closely at how our rating structure applies to the accommodation sector.

That includes:

- Whether properties used predominantly for short-term letting should be **consistently captured under the targeted tourism rate**
- How we identify and verify those properties at scale
- Aligning **planning, building use, and rating treatment** so the system reflects reality
- Ensuring there is a **level playing field across all accommodation providers**.

The current situation — where some pay and some don't, and some operate outside the intended rules — cannot continue.

We will be taking a firmer, more structured approach to this. It will be done properly, through the rating system and regulatory alignment, with clear expectations.

Worker accommodation — time to move from talk to delivery

Alongside tourism pressure sits another issue we have allowed to drag on for too long — worker accommodation.

I have started direct conversations with some of the district's major developers to move some aspects of this forward.

There is no shortage of reports, surveys, and strategy documents sitting on shelves. We all know the problem. The intent of those documents hasn't changed.

But talk has gone on long enough. Now we need delivery.

The focus is simple — get real projects moving.

That will require some honest conversations and some change.

We will also need to look at some **realignment within our spatial planning for Fairlie, Lake Tekapo, and Twizel** to ensure land is actually available and usable for this type of development.

I am seeking a clear commitment from developers to be part of the solution — not sit on the sidelines. At the same time, I expect the council to step up and enable development where it makes sense.

This is not about creating barriers. It is about removing them.

Beyond the existing major players, we will also be:

- Assessing where development can occur under the **current district plan framework**
- Identifying additional land and opportunities
- Actively seeking new project partners willing to invest and build

If we want a functioning district — with businesses that can operate and services that can be delivered — then we need places for workers to live.

That is not optional. It is fundamental.

The work behind the scenes

Alongside the big-ticket issues, there is a constant stream of detailed work happening that doesn't always make the headlines.

We've established focused subcommittees across key areas — including **property, finance, Pukaki Airport, and water**. Every councillor is actively involved in this work.

On the property side, we are undertaking a **full evaluation of all council-owned land and leases**. I'm well aware that historically some decisions around land disposal have not delivered the best outcomes. This time, the focus is different — long-term decisions, with a clear objective of achieving the **best possible return for ratepayers**. There is real opportunity here, and we intend to use it properly.

In finance, Councillor Sue Allan is doing a **deep dive into council spending, reserves, and cashflows over the past 20 years**. That is a substantial piece of work, and it will give us a much clearer understanding of where we've been and where we need to head. The results of that work will be made available in the near future.

Pukaki Airport is an area where we still have work to do. But the intent is clear — it will not be left to stagnate any further. We will be working through how it can be positioned to deliver better outcomes.

Forestry remains in a **steady, reliable position**. As those forests move toward maturity, they will continue to provide a stable return for ratepayers into the foreseeable future.

All of this sits alongside the day-to-day reality of governance — working with staff, making decisions, and keeping the district operating.

From my end, it's constant — emails, briefings, data, meetings — effectively a **never-ending conveyor belt of work** moving across the desk.

That's the part people don't see.

Staying focused on delivery

Alongside this, we've continued to progress the work that matters locally.

We've backed the direction of the Lake Tekapo master and traffic plan - another piece of work that's been dragging on for years and we all know the immense pressure Tekapo is under.

We are working with the Twizel Community Care Trust to establish the Twizel community hub and library, because shared facilities make sense. And we've moving towards transferring the Albury water scheme to its community, because local control works where it's practical.

Internally, we are tightening how we operate. And are demanding more discipline and accountability including better decision

making and outcomes for the residents and ratepayers of the Mackenzie.

Being on council isn't easy and change is often slow and frustrating. There is a maze of bureaucracy/rules and regulations and endless red tape. If processes aren't carried out properly, somebody will be complaining. It's what I call the Bureaucratic Monster that often achieves nothing but endless reports that get side lined never to see the light of day.

The Bottom Line here is we are not a new council sitting on our hands doing nothing. We are well aware of what is needed and what the community expects - also being cognisant of the local economy and global events.

There's a lot more going on here than what's written here and there is plenty to come

Stay Tuned

Scott Aronsen.

[Note - the content of this article has not been edited]

Grants and Scholarships

There are a number of grants and scholarships for the Mackenzie District that will be available during 2026. These include:



Community Board Grant

Grants to support not-for-profit community organisations within the Mackenzie District.



Creative Communities Scheme

Supporting arts activities within the Mackenzie District.



Genesis Tekapo Township Fund

Genesis Energy provides funding to support promotion of the Tekapo township.



Heritage Protection Fund

Funding to support historic buildings, items and places within the Mackenzie District.



Mackenzie County Scholarship

First year tertiary education scholarships, for secondary school students living within the Mackenzie District.



Sport NZ Rural Travel Fund

Grants for transport costs for sports clubs and school teams within the Mackenzie District, with team members between 5-18 years of age.

Keep an eye on our website for more information and relevant closing dates at mackenzie.govt.nz > [Community Grants and Scholarships](#)



A new home for the Twizel Community Library

The Twizel Community Library has moved into new premises at 3 Benmore Place, Twizel.

At Benmore Place, we're excited to be sharing the space with the Twizel Community Care Trust, who are progressing their project to create a community hub which will house the library in due course.



The library opening hours are still the same:

- Wednesdays 12:00pm – 5:00pm
- Thursdays 12:00pm – 6:00pm
- Fridays 10:00am – 2:00pm

We thank Twizel Area School for letting us stay in their former library building over the last few months prior to the demolition and repurposing of their site.

Information request responses are now available online

One of the important functions of any council is to respond to requests for information under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1987 (LGOIMA).

The questions that are asked cover a wide range of topics and the responses are now being proactively published on the council website. However, for privacy reasons, information that would identify an individual are not published.

New responses are published at the end of each month, at mackenzie.govt.nz > Council > Information Requests



Booking Facilities

Are you planning an event, and would like to see if a community centre or public open space within the Mackenzie District is available? Booking schedules are available on our website.



Schedules for hall and event venues at Albury, Fairlie, Tekapo and Twizel are under mackenzie.govt.nz > Services > Parks, Venues and Recreation > Halls & Event Venues

To book a facility, contact Council on 0800 685 8514 or email info@mackenzie.govt.nz

Did you know?

You can now watch Mackenzie District Council meetings live online.

If you miss the livestream, you can find the videos and catch up on our website. Look for the meeting details on our Meetings and Agendas section of the website at mackenzie.govt.nz > Council > Meetings and Agendas



Home energy toolkits

Alpine Energy and Mackenzie District Council have recently launched Home Energy Toolkits.

These toolkits can be used to identify key issues in a home that waste energy including: dampness, heat loss, and power-hungry appliances, giving you the tools to create a drier, more efficient home.

The kits can be borrowed from Mackenzie District Libraries at Fairlie and Twizel and staff can show you how to use them.

There will be future public sessions held at the libraries from Alpine Energy and Mackenzie District Council staff to demonstrate the advantages of the kit.



Mobile Shop & Traders Licenses

Applications for a Mobile Shop and Traders License for the 2026 to 2027 financial year close on 31 May 2026.

Applications can be made through Council's website: mackenzie.govt.nz > Services > Food safety

Or alternatively email compliance@mackenzie.govt.nz for an application pack or call the office on 0800 685 8514.



The Mackenzie Grant Finder

Mackenzie District Council has teamed up with GrantGuru to develop the Mackenzie Grant Finder.

The Mackenzie Grant Finder brings together available grants and funding options specific to local community groups, not-for-profits, businesses and individuals.

Organisations and individuals can use the search engine and filter grants by industry, sector, or project type, as well as benefit from expert advice and tips to strengthen their grant applications.

This free resource is a comprehensive and up-to-date list of funding options for our community. It is an easy way to check out what grants are available.

You can also register for alerts about funding programs that are relevant to you when they become available, so that businesses and community groups can prepare funding applications well in advance of the closing date.

Discover more at mackenzie.govt.nz/grantfinder

