

‘Progress’ seen on water services plan

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The door has closed on keeping Waitaki water services in-house — merging services with either Timaru or rejoining a four-way union with three other Otago district councils are now the only options on the table.

Waitaki District Council has resolved to explore two joint service partnerships with Timaru District Council, and with the Southern Waters group, which comprises Clutha, Gore and Central Otago district councils.

Speaking at Tuesday’s full council meeting, Mayor Melanie Tavendale said the council’s original Water Services Delivery Plan had been turned down by the government and continuing down the internal route would clearly be “unpalatable” to the government.

“So, this conversation is a precursor to us making a decision into which direction we do go in.”

Mayor Tavendale pointed out that meant the council was no longer looking at anything outside of those two options.

Councillors voted unanimously in agreement.

Cr Rebecca Ryan summed up the feeling of several councillors who had previously voted against joining the Southern Waters group in favour of the now rejected in-house model in the previous triennium.

“I’m really comfortable where we’ve landed here. I’ve always been open to collaboration and exploring different models where they can deliver better outcomes for our communities.

“And I think even if this decision has such long-term consequences and it’s important that we even, with the tight time frames, have enough information in front of us to be able to make the informed choice.

“I do want to acknowledge the feedback that we received from our community and consultation last term because there was an expression in favour of retaining an in-house model, and that was an important part of that decisionmaking that we made earlier, but at the same time, the national picture has really continued to shift here.

“That doesn’t invalidate the community’s views, but it does mean that we need to consider those alongside a really challenging and changing environment.”

In October, Local Government Minister Simon Watts appointed former Environment Minister Amy Adams as a Crown facilitator, after the Department of Internal Affairs assessed the council’s Water Services Delivery Plan, required under the new Local Water Done Well legislation, as “sub-optimal”.

Speaking publicly for the first time at the meeting (through video link) Mrs Adams sounded positive about the “collaborative approach” the council was taking.

“I think that’s all really positive progress. You’ve got two very good options on the table for you to consider.

“I think there’s some really good progress being made and the willingness from everyone to the point that was made around the table — the nice thing is that you’ve got two very willing partners.

“There’s no sense of you having missed your window and now being in a disadvantaged position.

“Quite the contrary is true. There’s two options who are both very keen to work with you and develop options. So that puts you in a better position than perhaps you had initially feared.”

More information, including a direct comparison of the potential benefits and risks of both options, will be presented to the mayor and councillors early next year for a final decision on which direction to take.

A review of the condition of council assets was requested by the Department of Internal Affairs in October following its rejection of Waitaki’s Water Services Delivery Plan.

The first stage, an independent assessment of all the existing data on the council’s networks, has now been completed.

The second stage will involve targeted investigation of the network to increase confidence in the asset review. That will be used to create a new water services delivery plan.

This second stage will take place between December 2025 and March 2026 at a cost of about \$300,000.