

# TELLING THE REAL STORY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS



## LONELY WOMAN FINDS BELONGING IN SMALL SEASIDE COMMUNITY

The team behind Snells Beach Community Conversations have chosen a Newspaper format to reflect key themes that emerged over two weeks of conversations with different parts of the community. The stories represent issues affecting the underlying wellbeing of the town along with the usual issues such as roads, rates, and council service provision. There are debates about sports fields, coastal areas, youth activities, or public spaces as well as questions about what kind of community people want to live in.

The stories published are based on real concerns, and public discussions within the community. However, names and identifying details are changed or fictionalised. This allows broader social themes to be identified while protecting people's privacy. A story about an older resident who feels isolated may reflect experiences shared by many people. A newcomer wanting to connect with more local people may represent a common experience.

There are differing community views around issues like growth, diversity, and environmental protection. One goal of this project is to create conversations that will help build relationships and understanding across different people and groups in the community. Another goal of the project is to identify and prioritise small scale community initiatives that groups of people may want to work on together.

Small towns are changing across New Zealand. The challenge is whether communities can respond thoughtfully without losing the sense of connection and human scale that made them special in the first place.

-Snells Beach Community Conversations Team

After a difficult divorce and years of feeling isolated in the city, 38-year-old Hannah Mercer moved to the quiet seaside town of Snells Beach hoping for a fresh start.

At first, Hannah kept to herself, spending long days walking the shoreline and adjusting to the town's slower pace. Then local people began welcoming her through small acts of kindness – conversations at the library, invitations to community events, and volunteer work after a winter storm.

Over time, Hannah formed close friendships. "I came here feeling completely alone," she said. "Now I feel like I'm part of something. I'm even thinking of starting a weekly book club that I think will be popular with other people."

Hannah says Snell Beach's strong sense of community helped turn an escape into a true home.

# BELOVED BEACHSIDE CAFÉ CLOSES DOORS, LEAVING SEASIDE VILLAGE HEARTBROKEN

Residents of the small seaside village of Snells Beach are mourning the loss of The Beachside Café, a popular beachfront gathering spot for both locals and visitors.

The café, known for its superb location, homemade food and early morning coffee crowd, closed suddenly after owners announced following Covid restrictions that rising operating costs and declining winter trade had made the business unsustainable.

“For many people, this wasn’t just a café – it was where the community met,” longtime resident Malcolm Ellis said. “You’d always run into someone you knew and have a good chat.”

The closure reflects wider pressures facing small hospitality businesses, including increasing rent, food prices and staffing costs. For many in Snells Beach, the empty building sitting on the waterfront now serves as a reminder of how a small community can lose a valued community gathering space in an iconic location.



# SNELLS BEACH RESIDENTS HOPEFUL DESPITE ONGOING BEACHFRONT DISAGREEMENT

Residents in the seaside village of Snells Beach say an unresolved disagreement over the future of a seating area on the waterfront reserve has created tension within the community. The discussion centres on two different visions for the foreshore. Friends of the Bay supports maintaining walking paths and accessible public amenities for locals, while Coastal Guardians want stronger protections for the dunes and wildlife habitats on the beachfront.

While council meetings and community discussions have at times become frustrated, locals say the situation has often been overstated and that most people involved remain

respectful. They also say that on the whole, dog owners and other beach users have been considerate and take care to stay away from the bird nesting area at the north end of the beach. “The vast majority of the community is being pretty reasonable about it,” said one local. “People care strongly, but most are trying to listen and work through it.”

The Rodney Local Board has faced pressure from both groups as it attempts to balance environmental concerns with public access and continued amenity.

Some people admit the prolonged debate has left parts of the

community weary and discouraged, particularly in a small place where many people know each other personally. “There’s definitely been a sense of despair at times,” said resident Helen Murray. “Not because people hate each other, but because everyone worries about the town becoming divided.”

Even so, many locals believe the shared commitment to protecting the coastline will ultimately help guide the community toward a resolution. “People here love this place,” Helen said. “That’s still the strongest thing holding the town together.”

# CONCERNS GROW OVER LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEENAGERS IN SEASIDE COMMUNITY

Residents in the small seaside village of Snells Beach say a lack of activities and spaces for teenagers is raising concerns about boredom and disengagement, with many calling for more opportunities to support young people locally.

Snells Beach is known for its beautiful, shallow beach, popular with young children and older residents who enjoy its calm waters and relaxed atmosphere. While the beach is a central part of community life, locals say it does not offer the excitement or challenge that many teenagers are looking for, especially compared to the surf beaches further along the coast.

With no high school in Snells Beach and unused sports fields sitting idle, teenagers often return home after school with limited options for socialising or structured activities.

Some older residents say there have been occasional small disturbances, such as late-night gatherings in public spaces, though they stress these involve only a small number of young people and are not a widespread issue.

“It’s more about boredom than anything else,” one shop owner said. “When there’s nothing to do, young people naturally look for ways to entertain themselves.”

Parents and community members are more broadly concerned about the long-term impact of limited opportunities, warning that many teenagers may choose to leave the town as soon as they are able.

“Local discussions are now focusing on how to better use the unused sports fields and introduce more youth-oriented activities, such as informal sports competitions, music events and shared community spaces.

Despite the concerns, many residents say Snells Beach remains a safe and welcoming town, with a strong desire to ensure young people feel included in its future.

“They’re not causing trouble,” Doyle said. “They just need something that feels like it’s theirs as well.”

# CANADIAN GEESE RAISE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN SNELLS BEACH

Residents in Snells Beach are reporting increasing numbers of Canadian geese across coastal reserves, farmland edges, and grassy foreshore areas. The introduced Canada goose is a large grazing bird that feeds heavily on grass and wetland vegetation. Three Canada geese can eat the same amount of grass as a sheep. Locals say flocks are leaving areas of pasture closely cropped and contributing to soil disturbance, which may increase silt runoff into nearby estuaries and threaten the beach’s treasured sea grass beds.

Environmental observers warn the increasing numbers of Canada geese are affecting coastal habitats that support native shorebirds such as New Zealand dotterel and bar-tailed godwit, which rely on healthy shoreline feeding grounds.

There are also concerns about damage to coastal grasses that help stabilise dunes, alongside competition for farmland grazing areas on the town’s outskirts.

While the geese are now a familiar sight, residents and conservation groups are calling for closer monitoring and action to balance their presence with protection of vulnerable coastal ecosystems.

# SNELLS BEACH LOCALS ENCOURAGED TO GET INVOLVED AS COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS GROW

Residents in Snells Beach are being encouraged to take advantage of local groups, events and support networks, as well as speak up if they have ideas for new activities or community initiatives.

While a good range of clubs, volunteer organisations and informal gatherings already operate across the area, some locals say it can be difficult to know where to find reliable, up-to-date information about what is available.

“There’s a lot going on, but it’s not always obvious where to look,” said Lou, the local Snells Beach Community Facilitator. “People often have good ideas or want to get involved, but they’re not sure what the first step is.”

Lou says residents who have an idea for a new community group or event are encouraged to start small and reach out for support rather than feeling they need to organise everything alone.

“Most successful groups begin with a conversation,” Lou said. “You don’t need everything figured out. The key is connecting with others who are interested.”

She recommends a few practical starting points for residents:

- Checking local community noticeboards, social media pages and council listings for existing groups.
- Visiting community hubs or libraries to ask about support and available spaces.

- Speaking with neighbours or local organisations to gauge interest in an idea.
- Contacting the local council or community facilitator for guidance on setting up a group or event.
- Starting informal meet-ups to build interest before formalising a group.

Community leaders say many successful local initiatives—such as markets, walking groups and volunteer projects—began informally before growing into established activities.

“There’s real support available here,” Lou said. “If someone has an idea, there are usually ways to help make it happen.”

# SNELLS BEACH RESIDENTS QUESTION COUNCIL SPENDING PRIORITIES

Some residents in Snells Beach are questioning recent council spending on relocating rubbish bins, bollards, and minor streetscape works, saying the money could be better spent on community priorities.

Competing council requirements around safety, infrastructure, and compliance are creating pressure for the Snells Beach Residents Community Group, which is often caught balancing community

expectations with council planning decisions.

“There’s a feeling that resources are being wasted on shifting things around that nobody was asking to change,” one resident said. “Meanwhile there are bigger issues people actually care about.”

People have called for greater focus on youth activities, community spaces, local events, and

environmental projects. Council representatives say the works are linked to long-term planning and safety standards, though some locals feel stronger consultation is needed.

“People want investment in the human side of the community,” one resident said. “Not just moving bollards from one place to another.”



## NEWCOMERS FINDING THEIR PLACE IN SNELLS BEACH COMMUNITY

New people moving into Snells Beach from Auckland and beyond, say settling into a small coastal community can be both welcoming and unexpectedly challenging.

New arrivals are drawn by the beach, slower pace of life, and strong sense of community but some say it can take time to understand how local networks work and where to find opportunities to connect.

“When you first arrive, everyone already seems to know each other,” one recent resident said. “It’s friendly, but you can still feel a bit on the outside at first.”

Local community facilitator Lou says even small acts of connection can make a significant difference.

“Joining a local activity, volunteering, or simply introducing yourself to neighbours helps people feel part of the town much more quickly,” Lou said. Residents say the town benefits when newcomers become actively involved, bringing fresh ideas, skills, and energy into community life while also helping support local groups and events.

“Every long-time local was new once,” one resident said. “Communities stay strong when people make space for others to belong.”

## QUIET CHALLENGE FACING OLDER RESIDENTS IN SNELLS BEACH

Snells Beach residents say more attention is needed on the quiet challenges facing older people living alone after the loss of a partner.

For many elderly residents, daily life can become increasingly isolated following bereavement, particularly when health issues begin to make household tasks and transport more difficult. While some support services are available, locals say companionship is often just as important as practical care.

“One of the hardest things is the loneliness,” said one resident whose wife died several years ago. “You can manage a lot physically, but missing regular conversation and connection is different.”

Community groups say many older residents want to remain independent in their own homes while still feeling connected to the wider community. Informal visits, shared meals, transport help, and social activities are often described as small gestures that make a significant difference.

Locals are now calling for stronger community networks and more opportunities for older residents to stay socially involved, particularly in a town where many retirees have settled later in life and may not have extended family nearby.

“It’s not only about care,” one volunteer said. “It’s about company, dignity, and feeling remembered.”

# SNELLS BEACH BALANCES CHANGE AND IDENTITY AS GROWTH RESHAPES COASTAL COMMUNITY

The seaside community of Snells Beach is undergoing steady change as more people move north from the city, bringing new growth but also raising questions about how to preserve the long-valued small town coastal character.

Once known for its quiet pace and what many describe as a distinctly “Kiwi beach lifestyle,” the community is now experiencing new housing developments, rising population, and a more diverse mixture of residents. Long-time locals say they welcome positive development but also express concern about the gradual loss of what they see as the town’s original identity—an informal, close-knit atmosphere shaped by decades of relatively stable population and low-density living.

“There’s a feeling that things are



changing faster than people expected,” said one resident. “It’s not that change is bad, but there’s a worry about losing what made the place feel special.”

Some community members also acknowledge quieter, more uncomfortable undercurrents as the town becomes more diverse, though these concerns are rarely discussed openly in public forums.

Local leaders say the challenge is less about stopping change and more

about managing it in a way that maintains the area’s “boutique” feel—something often cited as part of Snells Beach’s appeal. “It’s about keeping what people love about it,” one resident said, “while recognising that the town isn’t standing still anymore.”

Many residents agree on one point: the town’s future depends on finding a balance between preserving its character and not just adapting to but welcoming a changing community.

## YOUNG MEN FEEL INCREASINGLY DISCONNECTED

In many towns across the country, young men say they are struggling to find a sense of belonging in communities shaped largely by older generations. Rising housing costs, limited job opportunities, and changing social expectations have created a growing divide between younger residents and the communities around them.

Several young men interviewed in Snells Beach described feeling “outnumbered” and “spoken for” in local decision-making, where long-

established leaders and older homeowners dominate public meetings, neighbourhood groups, and community traditions. They said the values and priorities of older residents sometimes differ from their own experiences of economic pressure and social isolation.

“It feels like everything was built for a different generation,” said 24-year-old Liam Carter. “The people making decisions already own homes, have stable pensions, and don’t really understand what younger people are

dealing with.”

Sociologists say the tension reflects broader demographic shifts. Aging populations in smaller communities and suburban areas can leave younger adults feeling culturally disconnected, especially when opportunities for social mobility or representation are limited. Efforts need to be made to enhance stronger cooperation between generations and give younger residents a larger voice in local affairs.