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Hikoi for Health



HIKOI FOR HEALTH: Between 700 to 1000 people turned out to The Strand in support of the Hikoi for Health, in protest of the downgrade of Whakatāne Hospital's Obstetrics and Gynaecology department. Photos Samantha Scown.

Alisha McLennan

Saturday's Hikoi for Health attracted an "amazing" turnout, with up to 1000 people marching to protest the downgrading of obstetrics and gynaecology services at Whakatāne Hospital.

Chants of "Don't ghost our coast" and "Safe birthing is our right" rang out as placard-carrying protestors of all ages walked from Mitchell Park to Wharaurangi on The Strand.

Hikoi for Health Coalition member and Whakatāne councillor Nándor Tánczos estimates between 700 and 1000 people took part.

In welcoming the crowds at Mitchell Park before the hikoi, he said: "We stand with our midwives, we stand with our doctors, we stand with our nurses, and we stand with our hospital support staff who everyone at our hospitals need to do their jobs properly."

East Coast MP Dana Kirkpatrick congratulated the organisation team behind the hikoi.

"As a mother I know the anxiety that comes when you are pregnant and know you are facing that birth – this situation has escalated that anxiety throughout our community, and it is just not acceptable.

"Our children are our taonga, our future and our everything.

"It's a travesty that in a centralised health system we have ended up with more managers than ever, but they couldn't manage this issue in a timely and efficient way to ensure our mama and pepe were prioritised."

She asked people to share their stories with her, and their solutions to these problems so she could take them to parliament.

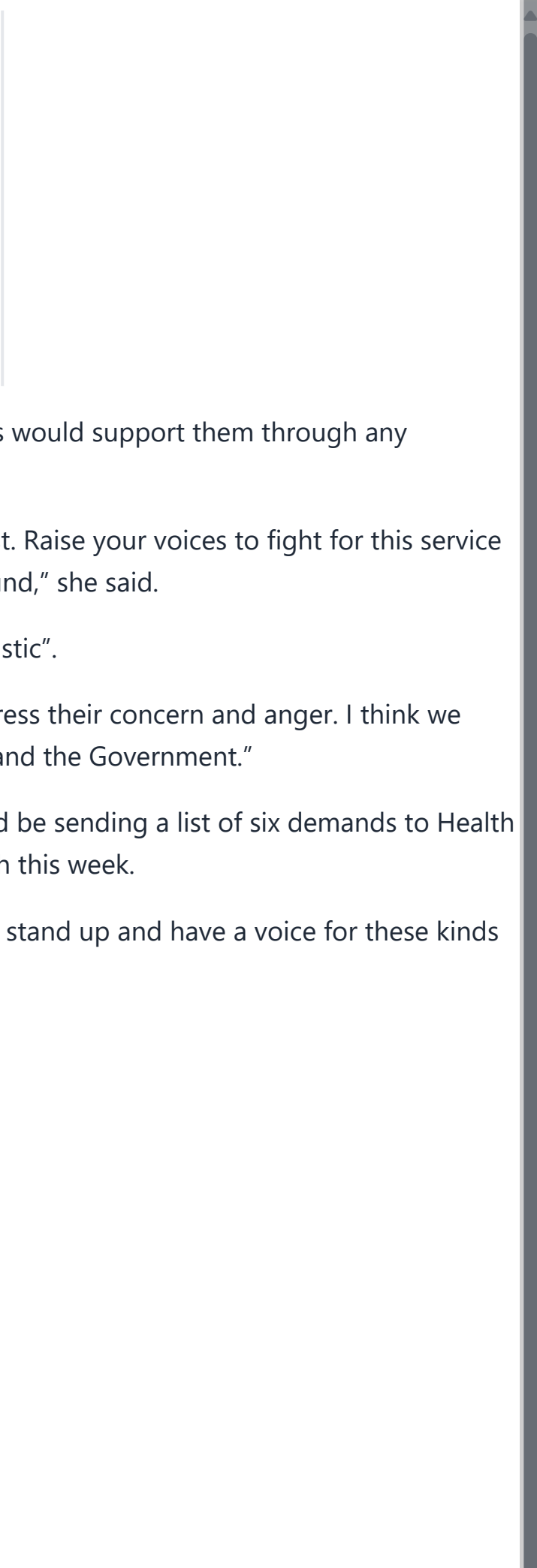
She said she and the Hikoi for Health Coalition would be pushing for regular public updates on recruitment and the local health services, and if these were not delivered, she would call for another public meeting with community support in a few months' time.



COMMUNITY ANXIETY: East Coast MP Dana Kirkpatrick shares her experience as a mother and shows political support for the Hikoi for Health.

Members of the crowd regularly called for "more funding" throughout the march and speeches.

Speakers at Wharaurangi included Labour Party mental health spokesperson and Tareí MP Ingrid Leary, Association of Salaried Medical Specialist union organiser Sarah Dalton, local midwife Brogen McBeth on behalf of local maternity caregivers and independent midwives, Green Party MP and health spokesperson Huhana Lyndon, midwife and manager of Kahu Taurima Holley Casey spoke on behalf of the Iwi Alliance and Te Kahu Taurima, and Whakatāne Act Local's Dave Stewart.



Ms McBeth assured mothers local midwives would support them through any potential changes and staffing issues.

"We are here for you down in the East Coast. Raise your voices to fight for this service but know that we have you in the background," she said.

Councillor Tánczos said the hikoi was "fantastic".

"The community turned out in force to express their concern and anger. I think we sent a powerful message to Te Whatu Ora and the Government."

He said the Hikoi for Health Coalition would be sending a list of six demands to Health NZ Te Whatu Ora and the Minister of Health this week.

"It's important for a community like ours to stand up and have a voice for these kinds of things."



GATHERED FOR KORERO: Councillor Nándor Tánczos welcomes those who gathered for the Hikoi for Health on Saturday.

Hikoi for Health Coalition member Vanessa Marjoribanks said she felt proud of the community's response.

"Te Whatu Ora have underestimated our anger. Our community will not let go of our right to a fully functional hospital. We know that our medical professionals are some of the best in the world, and we are fully behind them.

"Last month our MP was saying this was simply a recruitment issue.

"Now we know that was a smokescreen for dysfunctional management. The East Coast community will continue to demand accountability and the return of our adequately resourced hospital service."



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