

Mark Robinson - TCRT

Mark Robinson was not long in the chief executive's chair at Taranaki Rugby when the idea of forming the trust was passed across his desk.

With chairman Peter Crawford championing the idea, Robinson, with his Coastal connections, knew it had plenty of potential if the right things fell into place.

"Coming into the role (Taranaki Rugby ceo), it was clear the financial model behind rugby in Taranaki, and a lot of provinces, wasn't necessarily that sustainable," he said.

"It quickly dawned on me that we needed to find alternative forms of revenue generation to look to support the traditional ones like match day attendance and sponsorship and hospitality."

Back then, with a changing of faces around Taranaki Rugby's board, there was more time being spent on strategic planning and the idea of a farm trust to support community rugby was mooted.

While there was overall support of the idea, Robinson said it sat with a number of people to go away and find out exactly how it could work successfully.

"I think I remember we had a strategic session out at Onearo once and Craig Norgate was in the room and we were talking about having an ambition to have one of these farms," Robinson said.

"And Craig in his own unique way said if we were going to have one then we might as well have 10, everyone just sort of gulped around the room.

"There were a lot of things I took notice of from Craig, but that was not one of them. I thought if we got one off the ground then we would be doing well.

"But you never know, one day Craig's words might come true," he laughed.

Out of that board meeting at Onearo, Robinson remembers going back and looking at a few things when he got a call from his brother Blair who had heard about the Origin site and just how much potential it had.

That piqued his interest and the more they investigated what they would need to do collectively, the more he thought it could happen.

Negotiating as a team with Origin, they worked to see how it could benefit the multi-national company as well as obviously the trust if it was established.

"While there had to be a commercial element to it, we thought it could be quite a powerful alliance for an energy company to be closely aligned with something that could be really strong in the community that was obviously really important, such as community rugby," he said.

"Over the course of a few months, I guess it was, we sort of made a bid for it and talked about how we could make it work and then we started getting out to the community and started to talk to local farmers about the potential stock schemes while we looked at a low cost model around the supply of fertiliser, drench and chemicals.

"It all really got going from there. We didn't smash it out of the park overnight but we had a really sound model and it's gone from strength to strength, really.."

Robinson also remembers the hurdles and the work that was done once they got the farm up and running.

"I don't think anyone expected it to be plain sailing," he said.

The work done by the likes of Ray Barron and Peter Crawford, as well as the influence Graham Mourie had with New Zealand Rugby after it provided an underwrite, were significant contributing factors to sailing past the obstacles in Robinson's recollection.

“There were a lot of different people from our side playing different roles and working through what was a pretty tricky time,” he said.

“But we had a lot of resilient, hard working, tough people who had a great attitude and equally great character and values, so we always believed we could make it work.”

From that work, Robinson recalls a lot of interest from other provincial unions wanting details about what the Taranaki Community Rugby Trust was doing in conjunction with Taranaki Rugby.

“I think the thing I realised pretty quickly was that each province had their own strategic advantages when it came to funding, like Southland with the licensing trust,” he said.

“We didn’t have that as a province. We had the TSB Community Trust, but there was a lot of demand for that, so we had to look at things where you could control your destiny a bit more and this was where the farm was such a great initiative.”

At the time of being asked to reflect on his involvement with TCRT, almost \$1 million had been distributed to community rugby; there was now a farm in ownership; while the original site continues to be a flagship.

“I do reflect really fondly on those days because there were a lot of challenges but we really believed the overall direction of the union would benefit over time from this,” he said.

“It’s just fantastic to think that people’s kids and people’s grandkids over many, many generations are going to benefit from this for many, many years.

“When you think about it, it’s pretty cool that thousands of people are going to benefit from the direction of the trust. It’s just an incredible legacy to play a small part in.”