

Don't forget the environment

By Gary Taylor

Don't forget the environment! That's my message to the new Auckland council. We've had lots of rhetoric and *Herald* stories about economic development opportunities but precious little about what Aucklanders value most: the region's environment.

Mayor Len Brown made the point another way. He said improving Auckland's liveability is an imperative for him.

Certainly that involves moving decisively on key transport projects – completing the western ring route, building the CBD rail tunnel (which will double the network's capacity) and connecting rail to the airport. Most people need to go somewhere most days and we like to do it easily. Getting government buy-in to that vision should be achievable if the costs are spread over time.

But liveability is about more than convenient travel. It's about protecting and enhancing the attributes that made Auckland rank 4th highest city in the world in Mercers quality of life measure. We may be good but there's no room for complacency.

Auckland is a long, thin strip of land surrounded by ocean, with three big harbours. We live in a maritime environment, strongly influenced by the sea. Our land area is big: 490,000 hectares with over 4000 kilometres of coast and several large offshore islands. But the wet bits are much bigger: 1.6 million hectares of sea out to the 12 nautical mile limit.

It's a mistake to think managing the sea is easy. There will be highly contentious marine farming proposals coming forward next year with potential to conflict with more than 150,000 recreational boats in the region. The world's rarest marine mammal, Maui's dolphin, lives in Auckland's coastal waters and the new Council has responsibility to protect it under the RMA.

There are also major pollution problems to address. Sewage overflows and storm water runoff contaminate our beaches on a regular basis. Sediment from earthworks, forestry and farming is choking up some of our waterways and estuaries. Increasing amounts of heavy metals and persistent chemicals are washing off roads and accumulating in our harbours. Beaches are often closed to swimming. So managing Auckland's wet bits will pose significant challenges.

Then there's Auckland's nearly 4000 km of coastline, arguably our finest asset. Much of it is intensively developed for residential purposes and needs sensitive management. But there are many outstanding areas which haven't been developed yet and some of them never should be.

The Council has a duty to protect our coastal heritage and remaining outstanding landscapes. These are critically important to our quality of life.

There's also rural Auckland to consider. We have more rural land than urban. Much productive rural land has been gobbled up by lifestyle development and this needs to be much more carefully managed. The new Council is the biggest farmer in the region with 26 regional parks. From the Waitakere Ranges in the west to the Hunua Ranges in the south, there are extensive native forests to manage.

The Auckland Regional Council's extraordinary parks legacy must not be squandered.

The ARC held district and city councils to account through interventions in planning processes. But after 1 November, who will do that? Certainly the Environmental Defence Society, Forest & Bird and local community groups will do what they can but the task will be huge. The new monolithic Council will operate largely free from external checks and balances as it develops the new planning framework for Auckland. This is a real worry.

There's an overarching spatial plan to be produced by the end of next year. There are 7 district and 4 regional plans to be merged, possibly into one plan. There's the challenge of catering for Auckland's growth while protecting our natural environment and improving our quality of life. And along the way there will be thousands of good developments and bad developments seeking resource consents.

A positive solution would be the establishment of an Environmental Ombudsman to provide independent oversight of Council's environmental management. An Ombudsman would do for Auckland what the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment does for central government. The Ombudsman could be located in the Mayor's office and would be empowered to investigate any environmental management issue and report publicly to the Mayor. He or she would also evaluate the Council and the Council Controlled Organisations for their environmental performance on an annual basis.

The new era of local government we are entering holds much promise for improved outcomes. Better integration, more strategic thinking, higher quality executives and a positive can-do attitude look to characterise the Auckland Council. Let's look for economic development opportunities and safer, more cohesive communities. But don't forget the environment. After our wonderfully diverse people, it's the best thing we've got going for us.

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