

For better local governance, look at Tauranga



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comment

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We love democracy. It's the only game in town, except when local body elections roll round.

Instead of thrilling to the prospect of participating in electing a mayor, 20 councillors and 21 local boards with another army of community representatives, we shirk, overcome by apathy.

We are asked to vote for people we do not recognise by name, persuasion or politics. We don't know – and worse seemingly do not care – what they stand for and whether they have the capability, experience, imagination and a strategic vision that can be delivered.

This is about leadership and competence with consequences of getting it right – or wrong – impacting all of the country. Auckland generates almost 40 per cent of GDP and is home to more than 33 per cent of the population, with forecasts for ballooning growth to come when borders open to skilled migrants and investors.

We clutch at provincialism, sometimes dressed up as patriotism, from candidates we suspect are not really independent but have pinned their colours to the Nats or Labour to help fund their campaigns.

Then there are those who are attracted to public office with an overload of passion and small ideas.

Hardly the change heralded when the Super City was formed, promising an injection of fresh blood and fresh ideas to move on from the region's history of parochialism. We live in a democracy and take it for granted every day that our elected representatives will ensure all services run like clockwork.

Then we find our voice when sewage spills into our harbour, water rationing comes in, rubbish collections are late, hours-long traffic jams cost us time and money or council decides to increase rates and introduce a raft of targeted taxes to make up for shortfalls in revenue and planning, fund local infrastructure, or deal with new issues including climate change and providing basic amenities for a city that spread out not up.

But we wouldn't dream of not having an elected mayor and council – though many wonder why we need 21 local boards, free-ranging council-controlled organisations, and thousands of staff, to support a multi-armed governance, operations and administration octopus.

Many of us would also question why

consensus runs roughshod over decisions that would be best for Auckland. That's politics. Neither do we want to lose our right of self-determination with central government perched on our shoulder deciding on core infrastructure in the name of progress like Three Waters Reform, taking away our investment that we have paid for as ratepayers in Watercare, or transport improvements which we are pleased to use and for Wellington to pay more for if only they would remove the irksome regional fuel tax.

We'd be more open to a user-pays congestion tax to break gridlock and save tens of millions of dollars and welcome an overhaul of the ratepayer funding system, so costs are shared across all residents and users of council-provided amenities and resources.

Every Aucklander knows the cost of the infrastructure needed to keep Auckland moving, housed and employed is beyond our means. There has to be a better way.

Tauranga may be the example as it forges ahead with a new model that shows cities do not have to run using the tired elected representative council way.

Out of the shambles of a dysfunctional council, four government-appointed commissioners have won praise for an impressive list of accomplishments from the minister, business, residents and community groups.

Their scorecard includes strengthening relationships with the community, producing a long-term plan for 2021-31, improving culture in the council, delivering on complex programmes of work, from the civic centre precinct to investment plans for future growth and acting on hard decisions essential to building a prosperous and sustainable future for

Tauranga. Auckland could learn a thing or two here if it dared look.

Our governance is not broken but there is huge opportunity to reframe and improve the current model and invite collaboration with the private sector, investors, residents and communities to encourage and enable better participation, decision making and progress that benefits all.

The private sector can provide funding, technical know-how, and innovation that complements public-sector efforts. It isn't about power, it's about doing the best for Auckland, so bring us into the fold.