

# It can't be business as usual

Voters have a real opportunity to influence a new city, if they make their vote count,

writes **Michael Barnett**

**A**ll the signs are there that the city where we want to belong stands a very real chance of failing if it continues to believe that we can return to business as usual or that we will get away with recreating the past.

Auckland will stand still if we do, or if we believe that some of our operational behaviours of the past will be good enough to create an Auckland as an exciting place to be – they will not.

I respect much of the long-term vision that has been invested in Auckland in recent times but there are some things that need to happen now if the turning point for change is to begin.

As we prepare to elect new leadership for Auckland and with Covid mostly behind us, I cannot think of a better time to refresh our Auckland brand story in a way that resonates around the regions and the world. A brand with a welcoming personality and an action focused mentality is a must.

Auckland voters have a real opportunity to influence a new Auckland if they would just get out and exercise their democratic vote.

We deserve a mayor and councillors who deliver what the people of Auckland want – which can occur with honest consultation and partnership – not city centres built on the ideals of bureaucrats and politicians or infrastructure that does not reflect the needs of a commercial capital and a vibrant city.

Auckland not only needs a second crossing but a bridge to influence and negotiate more harmoniously and productively with Wellington in a relationship dedicated to bringing Auckland out of high dependence and into recovery and growth.

Wellington, apart from holding the purse strings to get our transport system linked and transformed into something we would want to talk about, can help right now to get not only Auckland but other enterprises throughout the country the workers

they need, short and long term.

The immigration policy needs to be urgently recalibrated to meet supply and demand priorities from health workers to crane drivers, apple pickers to chefs.

If Auckland is to become an innovation hub with a reputation that stretches beyond gaming entrepreneurs, we need to have a plan that attracts investors and the new migrants with skills to bolster our economy to be more productive and develop specialist sectors from robotics to automation and digital communication.

As a part of that plan, we will see

Auckland employers move to a new working environment, perhaps not dreamt of five years ago. They know that they will either adapt or lose the access they have to skilled employees to survive. The hybrid model of “some office-some home” will create savings and opportunity for everyone but is a change that cannot be ignored.

The cost for Auckland city is likely to be high with fewer daily commuters, smaller office footprints and higher vacancies as big

employers operate satellite offices and “work from home” options to recruit and retain sought after skills.

That is not good news for retail, hospitality, attractions, and Auckland Transport which is already warning us of ever escalating City Rail Link costs and chopping back services. A mixed message, when the aspiration is to encourage public transport use, and cycle and walking to get round the city to reach carbon neutral goals.

For our central city businesses, the turning point will be looking at the options for catching trade at different times.

Dolly Parton is the only person singing from the nine to five song sheet.

People work different hours and self-determine their lifestyles. They do not conform to the old ways. Ask any of our new Aucklanders and

young people and they will tell you they like being out day and night and want to eat and retail when they feel

like it, nine to five no longer works perhaps looking at ten till ten might. We want them to be in town, not just crawling along a crowded Dominion Rd looking for the best bubble tea in town.

We have a new playbook to write to create attractions, entertainment options and amenities. To draw in friends, families and visitors for retail, exercise and entertainment therapy. We also want students back and more people living, working, and playing in the central city just like other great cities in the world where you can feel the heartbeat.

Heart of the City shouldn't be the name of an organisation but the destination for a shopping and entertaining experience.

The CBD is where people go to socialise and share company. The city should reward them with bright lights and a great environment, not just concrete bollards and polka dots painted on the roads. They should offer easy, safe transport options past midnight and parking because you cannot always catch a bus or train if you are not on one of the main routes.

The waterfront must continue to be reimagined. We cannot have the world's most expensive carpark for used Japanese vehicles plonked on the harbour's edge nor can we keep the port in downtown, caught in a storm, mauled by politics, marred by poor returns and cramped for growth. The port is critical to our local and national economy, but it is a 19th century port that needs to grow with the times and be the port of the future and a national asset, not an anchor at the bottom of Queen St.

Infrastructure development and funding is the killjoy of our aspirations to be a great city. But it shouldn't be if the city has a vision and a strategy and builds constructive, participative

relationships across all sectors that all share that goal.

And if we are smart there is an escape from the city and the pepper pot developments overtaking suburbia.

We have beaches and forests and a beautiful, productive rural edge that continues to grow the food we need to feed ourselves and the visitors we want to attract. That horticultural, agricultural, and farming belt on our outskirts needs to be respected and protected. It is part of our heritage, history, character, and identity.

Right now, we have an opportunity which is not a call for another conversation but a call for action.

● *Michael Barnett is Chief Executive of the Auckland Business Chamber*

We have a new playbook to write to create attractions, entertainment options and amenities.

