

10. DEMOCRACY, ENGAGEMENT, and PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Our vision

Hamilton, enriched by the Waikato River, a socially and environmentally responsible city and a good place to live:

- affordable and equitable,
- safe, clean and green,
- where people value cultural diversity,
- celebrate our heritage,
- engage in local affairs,
- and develop a sustainable community for our grandchildren and future generations.

And regionally:

A future where a healthy Waikato River sustains abundant life and prosperous communities who, in turn, are all responsible for restoring and protecting the health and wellbeing of the Waikato River, and all it embraces, for generations to come.

This is the overall vision that drives this Alternative Plan for Hamilton.

Democracy, Engagement, and Public Accountability

We tailor the following integrated set of recommendations as an attempt to restore confidence and foster accountability in local government, strengthen the relationship between council and community, and contemplate the changing role of the council prior to the 2022 elections in the likely event of government's removal of functions.

The global challenges of our times coinciding with national reforms add up to another opportunity - to review the structure and processes of our council. This also fits with current 10-Year-Planning, and is midway in the current triennium with local body elections in October next year (2022).

Our community view sits within a well-documented climate of disinterest and despondency concerning local government, and the withdrawal of the majority from democratic participation in recent years (here and elsewhere). Recent publicity including the sacking of Tauranga City Council and burst plumbing in Wellington needs to be taken more seriously alongside the government's reform agenda downsizing traditional local government. We appreciate the council's expressed desire to rally up interest but a deeper think is required.

We also tackle the community view that officials run the show, not the elected representatives. And whether there's a better way for councillors to govern, rather than weekly schedules stuffed with briefings and meetings and uncountable pages in late-delivery information. And the consequence, the majority now full-timers, career politicians. And what's up with circulating stories that they are not to speak with staff ...and staff are not to speak with them... It's a long list.

There's an old quote in a new book from Jim Bolger, one of our most experienced 'local' politicians. Defining politics as 'the science of government – administering public affairs and setting up laws and regulations to govern society', he added: 'To prevent abuse or tyranny there needs to be checks on the authority and power of those practising politics'. (from 'Fridays with Jim', 2020, pg 106). That's local government too.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations focus on

- Standing Orders

Standing Orders have become a **cumbersome set of meeting rules**, replacing protocols developed over centuries, with legal requirements for regular review. Local body members seem to have lost touch with this housekeeping, seem unfamiliar with recent amendments and the influence of LGNZ and central government officials.

The kitset of 'how to run a meeting' has arisen out of Parliamentary experience as well as processes grown in village democracy and largely universal good manners to enable the flow of discussion, agenda items and debate without bloodshed. This legacy includes the 'three readings' law-making process and small 'select committees' where citizens have their say in a more welcoming manner - sitting, no longer 'standing' as once ordered when in front of their betters.

Model Standing Orders need an independent refresh to better fit them for the council governing role, keep management accountable and on track, remove bureaucratic shackles, and free-up opportunities for residents to engage.

- Structure

Mayors recommend the governance structure (committees etc) to new councillors, mindful of politics and trends, and influenced by bureaucracy. There's a 21st century pattern of big inclusive committees (all councillors) and lots of smaller ones enabling most councillors into a chair's role (and remuneration?). The recent trend adds council briefing sessions – lots of them too.

The hint is that pay is the political carrot of undue influence, yet it is widely recognised that time spent in meetings is not a barometer of council (or councillor) effectiveness. There is community concern that councillors are now 'so busy' with meetings and excessively long reports (too often late) they have little time for the grass roots.

Feedback and observation suggest the **governance processes are also cumbersome**, obstruct the integrated considerations required for sustainability and the Four Wellbeings and inhibit a free-flow of discussion. **An independent refresh would assist the mayor and councillors on the merits of other options for better outcomes.**

- Governance

An associated issue is the concept of '**governance**' **relevant to local bodies**, the influence of the corporate director model, and applicability to democratic community representation, the common good, and the Four Wellbeings. **And how we gather local leaders into the council tent.** The proposed review should also take into account the role and relevance of the business of **governance training programmes** (including university and LGNZ's Equip).

- Engagement

We also recommend an evaluation of **mechanisms and processes for community engagement** to ensure the emphasis is 'listening to the people', fair feedback rather than spin doctors and propaganda push. This should include independent evaluation of council's consultation methodology and analysis.

This responds to community concerns at 'lip service' and questionnaires framed 'to get the answers council/staff want rather than independent community opinion (eg Peacocke Growth Area, West Town Belt Management Plan/Founders Theatre demolition, and classroom submissions on the Maori partnership strategy Pou Marama Ora).

https://www.taxpayers.org.nz/hcc_children

- Opening the door to City Hall

Our recommended governance models include **voluntary expert advisory groups** (kaumatua replacing consultants), **community enterprise boards** (retaining public ownership but reflecting the proposed Waikato Regional Theatre model and an adaptation of the CCO/Council Controlled Organisation), and **neighbourhood-based local boards** (based around community houses and local schools).

Neighbourhood boards offer direct local opportunities to influence council decisions about those local patches, and council services, and build upon the operations of community houses and school boards of trustees. This would also offer the council direct feedback, and provide a first-hand opportunity for all age groups to learn more about 'Civics' – thus promoting true engagement.

Community enterprise boards would add value and passion to a selected range of council services including the city zoo, swimming facilities, Claudelands Events Centre, Rugby and Cricket stadia.

A combination of expert advisory groups and enterprise boards should be introduced for **all major council projects**, particularly in the infrastructure sector to ensure best practice and cost efficiencies and reduce the risk of budget overruns/contract escalations (eg Dixon Road roundabout and Wairere-Cobham Drive intersection).

Reflecting the co-management role and structure of the Waikato River Authority, a priority is strengthening the **green ecological heart of the city**.

An **expert advisory group plus a community enterprise board** should be established for Hamilton Gardens, and include the city Parks and Gardens sector. The task would be to promote opportunities for positive environmental impacts and ecological restoration and enhancement with increased neighbourhood and school engagement and alongside 'friends' community groups. We believe there is an opportunity to restructure these services with local units and additional training, education, research, archaeological studies and development opportunities in partnership with other agencies.

This ecological thrust also applies to our recommended **Waikato River strategy and gullies enhancement**, at a time of uncertain economic and social conditions. Further engagement with community groups and services including EnviroSchools (which began in Hamilton) would be encouraged.

Expert advisory groups should also be established for **Waikato Museum and the Libraries** and provide for representation from 'Friends'.

Other associated matters:

- Code of Conduct

The expanding model **Code of Conduct** also cries out for attention, can prove to be pointless and ineffective in ensuring peace and productivity around council tables (with Tauranga, Wellington, and Waikato Regional Council current examples but talk of a general

disposition across the nation). The model Code reminds of a school prefect's politically correct attempt at quelling an unruly Year 10 classroom, and enables councillors to over-rule the electorate's choice of representative by prohibiting them from meeting participation.

General Business – to restore this item to all agendas. This raises the issue of democratic rights and responsibilities, and the ability of all elected members openly to 'test the political appetite' first before any bureaucratic consideration. This complements the **public forum** which serves a different purpose and should also be evaluated for democratic effectiveness and public satisfaction.

Review the roles of committee chairpeople - in line with the 2002 mayoral role, to include their control of agendas (in liaison with the mayor) and requests for independent reports, plus the value in support staff independent of the Chief Executive's office (reflecting the Cabinet model)

Review chief executive contract models - taking account of the fit with council elections and enabling post-election reviews, setting remuneration and salary reviews, approval of the administrative structure including senior managers, and any other matters including potential for legislative reform.