

## LEAVING MANUKAU CITY COUNCIL JUNE 2010

News

### Council chief bows out

By PJ TAYLOR

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IT WILL come as a surprise to many that one of the most experienced leaders in local government in the region is stepping down as the new super-city starts on November 1.

As speculation circulates about which present high-ranking local authority managers will be chosen for the top roles in the new Auckland Council, Manukau City's chief executive Leigh Auton is calling time on a 35-year career in public service.

"I've chosen not to apply for any of the positions. For me that's a big decision," he says. "I've been 32 years in Manukau City and another three years before that at Waitemata.

"The time's right for me to go. I spent a lot of time last year working my way through that. I'm still a couple of years shy of 60 and if I want to set up my own business, it's the right time to do it."

His new work for the private sector entity Auton and Associates will be a "mixture" of board directorships and consultancy business in Australasia.

"It's in that strategic thinking, board leadership area, across private and public sectors.

"Obviously it'll have a relationship to my old profession of planning, but it's about giving guidance around strategic positioning."

He'll also maintain his working relationship with Northland Maori. He's been on the board of the Ngapuhi Asset Holding Company for 18 months, with former Auckland International Airport chief executive John Goulter as chairman.

"I've been consolidating the strategic planning. The iwi will be significant investment players – they are now – but increasingly. Ngapuhi will have a Treaty of Waitangi settlement in the not-too-distant future, building on our fisheries base. We are, but we will be, big players like Tainui.

"In 10 years time, our country will have a different pattern of investment based around this factor alone."

Mr Auton has also been appointed to the board of Counties Manukau Rugby League.

"League is being reshaped with the active support of Sparc [Sport and Recreation NZ]. That's exciting. Jim Doyle is now the chief executive of New Zealand Rugby League. It's got a new board and they've created seven zones. Auckland is being split into the north, the Auckland isthmus, and Counties Manukau, which is Otahuhu through to Tuakau."

Mr Auton was born in Kawakawa, Northland, and grew up in the Hokianga at Mangamuka, attending tiny country schools.



Leigh Auton.

Most of his extended family, with 24 cousins, are and have been dairy farmers. "I would have been a farmer, except my dad said to me, 'if you want to get up at 4am and milk cows, you can buy your own farm'. So I went to university and became a town planner," he laughs.

He worked hard and earned a couple of masters degrees and a post-graduate diploma at the University of Auckland.

"It wasn't until sixth form that someone mentioned university. I had no idea about such institutions. It seems crazy, but it's true. You think about how many other eyes could have been opened in those [rural] communities.

"Most of my [school] colleagues, all bright kids, chose to go into the old Post Office and all those sorts of things.

"But that was just the nature of the place. You never thought about university, that was a long way away.

"There was a change at the time, in the 1960s and 1970s, the [social] revolution, and people going to universities.

"Coming to Auckland – whoa, the politics of campus. Peace not war – that was huge, memories of Germaine Greer and Tim Shadbolt and those sorts of people, demonstrations down Queen Street every Friday night.

"I say to my children now – all three have gone through Auckland University – note the people who you go through with, they'll all become leaders in different spaces and different places. That's what I've noticed. Helen Clark was my tutor."

Mr Auton says he embraced the organisation of Manukau City, when he arrived from an almost dysfunctional Waitemata Council.

"That was an interesting experience. Talk about different cultures, and this will be the big challenge [for the Auckland Council] bringing eight different organisational cultures together.

"To come here – it was well-managed, stable. It had Sir Lloyd Elsmore as mayor, Ron Wood as the city manager, and subsequently Sir Barry Curtis and Colin Dale.

"It's always been a stable, considered place. And you can see the results of the strategies these people developed early on. I spent my whole career implementing these strategies.

"It's a simple vision, about a city that was growing quickly in terms of population. Sir Lloyd, a conservative politician, elected on a platform of every ward would have a swimming pool, a library, a community space – saying, 'and by the way, we're going to create New Zealand's biggest industrial estate'.

"There are legendary stories of getting up in a helicopter and saying that [area] will be industrial, that'll be residential. It was simple, but effective.

"Today we spend forever analysing an idea, debating it, consulting it. I think we should return to a simple vision of leaders to spell it out, and then put it in place and implement."

Mr Auton talks of a time in the 1970s and 1980s when the country and region had probably half the laws and bylaws now on the statute books. Developing cities outwardly and urban encroachment of rural areas was easier because much of it was open green space.

"It was, but it was always controversial. The establishment of this [Manukau] city centre was huge. It

was a massive fight. Life has become much more complex. I'm with people who say let's make the Resource Management Act and those processes simpler. I know the downsides, but I also know the upsides.

"I was the young planner that did Pine Harbour Marina. We approved that in three months under the old Town and Country Planning Act. No appeals. The applicant was smart, did a lot of legwork."

In summarising 32 years of service, Manukau City Council has been a fulfilling employer for Mr Auton.

"I've enjoyed working here. I once asked my former boss, city planner Mike Amon, why have you been here so long? He said 'every need in my career I can get in this place, as a planner and engineer'. It was the development place to be. You couldn't replicate that.

"For me, looking forward, the challenge for the new Auckland local government structure is what's the leadership paradigm?

"As a leader, that's what I've put a huge effort into. Providing that right culture and engagement. You have to do the great stuff, strategic, marketing, providing the governance structure, but what does it fundamentally come down to? It's about how you engage with your colleagues and how you motivate them and how they motivate communities. It's quite simple."

And as a sign-off, Mr Auton reflects what many local government people are thinking. "Fundamental to the success of this regime is the influence of local boards. If they don't have real powers, this model will struggle to survive."