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## **New council has to be big decider**

By MARIANNE KELLY

Monday, 31 May 2010

### **• *Howick and Pakuranga Times***

WHILE he's an advocate for council controlled organisations (CCOs), Leigh Auton hopes the new Auckland Council, and not corporate directors, will make the "big decisions".

The Manukau City Council chief executive says: "I personally promoted CCOs as a mechanism to deliver services to the community.

"The key issue is that the council representing the community is the controlling body.

"The big issues are decided by the council," says Mr Auton. "For example, in the past Manukau's power structure for water was determined by the council in consultation with the community. Pricing, within prescribed margins, was determined by Manukau Water [its CCO]."

He asks will the new Auckland Council make the big decisions involving its CCO Watercare, or around transport and its CCO Auckland Transport?

"A lot of submissions about CCO control have been put forward by politicians, the councils, and concern has been expressed by mayors Brown and Banks also," he says.

Suggestions by the Auckland Transition Agency that Manukau Leisure Services and Manukau Building Consultants will be absorbed into the Auckland Council rather than another CCO are not supported, Mr Auton says.

"We want to see them as CCOs."

He's reluctant to comment on the Property Holdings CCO which Tomorrow's Manukau Properties (TMPL) is expected to become part of, because "we don't know what shape and form it will take."

However, absorbing the TelstraClear Pacific Events Centre into a new CCO called Regional Facilities is questioned by Mr Auton.

"Like the Waitakere Pacific Arts and Cultural Trust and the Bruce Mason Centre [North Shore] we have concerns about them being absorbed into an entertainment CCO," he says. "Our concern is about how we make sure we have smaller organisations representing their local communities because they are more agile than the big ones.

"There are clearly benefits from a regional CCO which can manage the big regional events and events centres. But community interests should be run locally rather than by a big CCO. The question is where we make the cut-off [between local and regional]."

Papatoetoe councillor and Botany resident Bob Wichman was a doubter when Manukau City contemplated forming CCOs.

“Even though I had some doubt when the idea was first suggested and was quite vocal about it at council, in general I believe now that CCOs have been a vast improvement over the way Manukau City Council originally ran the business parts of the organisation.”

Mr Wichman was initially concerned that all the council was doing was building in another costly overhead structure, and that council staff should have been answerable for the day-to-day operations of the units.

“But I now realise that previously there was no real initiative for units such as water, properties and leisure to be accountable for expenditure or answerable to anybody whether they were run efficiently or otherwise.

“Now each unit with a board of directors, who were hand-picked for their expertise and a willingness to have an interest in the community in general, are answerable to the council through a review panel made up of council officers and councillors.

“They regularly meet with directors of the CCOs to ensure that the council and its ratepayers are getting value for money.”

It has been obvious, Mr Wichman says, that the CCOs have been able to justify their overhead structure and, except for some problems because of the recent recession, have performed very well.

“In some cases, such as Manukau Leisure and Manukau Water, exceptionally so.”

He's hopeful that, with changes made under the new Auckland Council, the CCOs will be modified or kept intact and able to take over or integrate with similar units of the other previous local authorities.