

Civil defence **too big a task** for local government



AsiaPacific Infrastructure content partner Leigh Auton says the creation of the Auckland supercity has provided an opportunity to significantly upscale the Auckland region's capacity and capability in emergency management.

The recent earthquakes centred near Castle Cliff in the Wairarapa reminded us again of the fragile but dynamic land on which our island nation is established. Likewise the events of Christchurch and the aftermath are continual reminders of the drama and impact of large natural events on our communities.

Earthquakes are seemingly the big current hazard in our minds, yet there are many others. Volcanic eruptions, floods, fires and wind are but some of the natural hazards that have also impacted on us from time to time.

Man-made events can be equally devastating. The recent Queensland fruit fly scare in Whangarei is a timely reminder of the potentially devastating impact of biological pest invasion. Described as the fruit industry's equivalent of foot-and-mouth disease, the impact on our economy of such a pest is potentially very large as this industry alone contributes \$4billion to our economy. The impact of PSA on the kiwi fruit industry has been devastating and provides a sobering example of the damage that can be done by insects.

So are we well-prepared for natural and man-made disasters? I believe we are improving significantly, although there will probably never be enough preparation for the big ones.

The creation of the Auckland supercity has provided an opportunity to significantly upscale the Auckland region's capacity and capability in emergency management. I say this from experience as a Civil Defence Controller under the previous local government regime.

Having had copious amounts of



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training in civil defence, and been involved in regular emergency management exercises across the region, I was never entirely confident that the fragmented nature of local government in the region would cope with a big event in Auckland. Fortunately Auckland has had a remarkably benign environment for natural disasters for decades, but that could change at any time. Some readers might think that Auckland is fully capable of creating lots of other disasters, but that would be unkind.

From my observations, it appears that civil defence and emergency

management is being significantly enhanced in Auckland.

I like the look and feel of how its preparedness for a disaster is rolling out. As an Auckland citizen, my civil defence cell phone app keeps me updated on event warnings, my local board has established lots of suburban networks, and more recently I joined one of several council advisory groups – in my case to assist in long-term recovery from an event. These groups are made up of individuals from outside the council, representing key sectors, responsible for helping the council in event-and-recovery prepared-

ness. What is impressive is the professionalism I see being exhibited by the council and other agencies in Auckland in preparing for the inevitable natural or man-made disaster. I also like the way the council has handled small localised issues, such as the tornado events which have impacted on Hobsonville and Albany.

A key driver has been the events of Christchurch. While it has been devastating for that city and our nation, one of the good things to come of it is our willingness to listen and participate in civil defence and emergency management.

The challenge I see for the rest of local government outside Auckland, and excluding Christchurch given the special circumstances prevailing in that city, is whether we have the right structures in place for effective preparation and management of disasters. I suggest not, and would push for this function of local government to be operated by regional government, or unitary entities rather than territorial. In my opinion, this is the right level of government to be managing such events, as they have the breadth and scale to cope with emergencies.

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