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Reflections on effective infrastructure

The past year has seen considerable progress in roading and transport development, but can the same be said of other areas of infrastructure?

Many of these latter areas directly or indirectly involve central and local government, and a question remains as to whether we have the best frameworks and structure for their effective delivery.

There's certainly been effective delivery when it comes to the number of big transport and roading projects that are nearing the completion of construction, being initiated or been consented. As a frequent user of the Waikato Expressway, it is a delight to see the progress towards joining up this critical transport network. In a few short years, a completed expressway will link Auckland to the south of Hamilton, providing a major stimulus to the economic growth of the Upper North Island.

Likewise the Waterview motorway connection on the Auckland isthmus will finally complete the motorway network originally identified by De Leuw Cather in 1956. A very long time to implement, hopefully not to be replicated timewise again in New Zealand. These are strategic assets which should be identified, consented and built in the best time possible.

And while commenting on Auckland, what great progress the central government and Auckland Council are making on public transport in Auckland. Having been involved in the early discussions and negotiations over the redevelopment of the rail system in the mid-1990s, what a joy it is to now travel on new, comfortable and well patronised electric trains.

The new public transport system being rolled out by Auckland Transport, which integrates rail, bus and ferries, is a great example of joined-up government systems, scale and good leadership. I'm looking forward to the start of construction of the central Auckland underground rail link early next year. It will be another game changer for the city.

In my mind, the challenge across New

Zealand is how we can develop integrated and joined-up structures, systems and processes to deliver infrastructure, such as evidenced in the Auckland examples. This applies not only to transport but also in areas such as the three waters, information technology, and within local government a whole range of 'backroom' infrastructure.

Creative collaborations

What is exciting are the excellent examples of collaborative, joined-up models throughout New Zealand. We need more of them nonetheless. Such an example, an exemplar of joined-up delivery, is found in the local government of the Bay of Plenty region. The establishment of BOPLASS some years ago has provided enhanced

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capacity and capability across a wide range of council services from the Western Bay through to Gisborne, a council outside the region.

Linked by a common broadband network, BOPLASS provides an infrastructure capability, through a joined up governance entity, to deliver services at a lesser cost to ratepayers, as well as providing a common experience for residents across the regions for these services. The model is owned and directed by the shareholding councils.

The Bay of Plenty also evidences good examples of strategic collaboration for growth, notably the Smart Growth Plan between the Western Bay and Tauranga

Councils. More recently the councils of the Bay of Plenty have initiated their Futures Project, a strategic collaboration around transport, two waters and communities of interest.

This is the type of direction the Minister of Local Government, Hon Paula Bennett, announced at the Local Government Conference in Rotorua during the year. Her expectation is for local government to critically look at how it undertakes what it does, to be potentially more efficient and effective in the delivery of its services to local communities.

This is about developing better economic and financial outcomes, improved infrastructure and the creation of employment across regions and New Zealand. Importantly, in my mind, such reform allows for local communities to shape their place, albeit potentially through different delivery models, but where shared services and strategic collaboration are the touchstones for success.

With my Local Government Commissioner hat on, the commission sees the model of working closely with regions to deliver agreed outcomes as being critical. As a local government practitioner of nearly four decades, I see a great opportunity in 2016 for this conversation to occur.

Finally, 2016 is an important year for local government. It is election year, a critical time in our democratic calendar. A time for debate and energised thinking. It's what makes local government interesting and vibrant.

Leigh Auton is a Local Government Commissioner and a Director of Auton & Associates with 35 years' local government experience, a chairman/director/trustee on several boards and provides consulting advice to public and private sector companies