

Reflections on the Auckland Unitary Plan

Prior to the Auckland Council deliberations and decisions on their response to the Independent Hearings Panel (IHP), there is a sort of phony war being played out in the media

A few journalists, including those working for the NZ Herald, have been taking a few jabs to stir up the pressure on the Auckland councillors.

I need to say that I have represented a few clients in the process, and have taken part in mediation and hearing processes. I have previously recorded my view that the administration of the hearings process, led by Judge David Kirkpatrick, has been first class.

There have been the odd grumbles, but in the context of the scale of the exercise and the importance of the documents, I believe the panel and the officials supporting the hearing commissioners deserve big congratulations.

The IHP had a clear date to complete the hearings process and recommend their findings to the Auckland Council. This was delivered on time, giving the Auckland Council a month to respond. We await the council's response. From a political perspective, the timing of their deliberations comes at a time of heightened tension based on the local body elections in October. Woe to be an Auckland councillor at this time.

The Independent Hearings Panel recommendations mark a very large milestone in Auckland's history. The Proposed Unitary Plan for the entire Auckland region is one part of the jigsaw that follows from the creation of the 'SuperCity' in November 2010. Its context was the inability of the former eight councils in the region to agree on the future growth pattern and development of Auckland.

As a chief executive of one of those eight councils, and as a town planner of many years, I note that the previous governance arrangements could not



and would not have delivered the coherent picture that the recommended unitary plan now delivers for Auckland.

I am very excited, and full of commendation, as to the recommendations of the IHP. They deliver for Auckland a clear picture of our city's growth for the next 30 years or more. Lots of other elements need to complement the plan, such as the investment of council and crown in infrastructure, but the planning framework is now being put into place.

The IHP has delivered a much simpler document than originally proposed by the Auckland Council. From my experience of delivering three District Plan Reviews for the former Manukau City Council, readily understandable, non-complex documents are important to the community. Certainty as to policies and rules attracts business and community confidence. Auckland will be well-served by this document as recommended.

The plan retains a Rural Urban

Boundary (RUB) with in-built flexibility to change it as circumstances arise. I have previously written in support of RUBs and MULs, subject to flexibility. The plan allows for private plan changes to move the RUB, an important step.

Moreover, the plan has provided a clear set of rules to allow the residential market to build up and build out. Often my planning profession tries to over-direct the market, but this plan gives space and opportunities for the market to operate efficiently.

There is no doubt the density provisions are fairly permissive, but necessary to allow Auckland to grow into a truly international city. Likewise the recommended plan allows for growth in industry and commerce, although this would appear to be more constrained over the longer term than the residential growth provisions.

In a wider context, the rest of New Zealand needs to recognise that Auckland is rapidly putting in structures and plans

that will greatly enhance its economic scale and importance in this country. The Unitary Plan will enhance its attraction for investment, and a place to live.

From my experience, similar conditions apply in the Bay of Plenty and increasingly the Waikato. Growth is significant now, but increasingly much of New Zealand's growth will occur in this 'Golden Triangle'. The challenge for the rest of New Zealand is whether it can react to the changes occurring in Auckland, Waikato and the Bay of Plenty such that it can compete to attract people and investment. But more on that some other time. Congratulations to the Independent Hearings Panel.

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