



WAIKATO MAYORAL FORUM

Summary of Waikato Mayoral Forum meeting 11 September 2017:

New economic development agency

Creating a Waikato-wide regional economic development agency was endorsed by the forum. The new Waikato Regional Development Agency – outlined by Waikato Means Business under chair Dallas Fisher – is due to become operational mid-2018.

To be based at the Innovation Park in Hamilton – with a proposed budget of \$2 million – the agency will also have service centres around the Waikato to ensure it is delivering value to businesses in the region and is not just big city focused.

Such an agency – in line with the direction set by the Waikato Plan - will help the region better access a share of the Government's \$60 million-plus regional growth programme funding, and attract national and international investment.

Due in part to a lack of co-ordinated effort, the Waikato is underinvesting in economic development. We're currently the only region without such a co-ordinated development agency.

We're not getting a fair share of that Government regional growth funding and not doing enough to attract investment. We're also not doing enough to develop skills and work readiness of our people and ensure they are in education, employment or training.

So the agency, as proposed, will help bring the Waikato Story to life and will be a much needed 'front door' for local Waikato businesses to get development help and for investors from outside the region to find their feet here to mutual advantage. And it's definitely designed to be a "doing it" entity.

Waikato Means Business may have been initiated by councils but is now very much led and driven by business. So it was great to see the forum unanimously swinging in behind the significant effort put in by Dallas and his team to get things cracking.

A proposed funding model for the agency will see councils, business and other sources all contribute to its budget. Individual councils are due to decide on their level of contribution.

Facilities funding framework

There was also unanimous forum support at the meeting for a new community facilities funding framework which outlines the way councils will work together to identify how regional and sub-regional facilities should be collectively and equitably funded.

Just as importantly, it helps local government work with others to take a collaborative, strategic approach to investing in community sports, leisure, cultural and arts facilities.

It is neither efficient nor effective for each council, school, and community group to develop and maintain their own sports, leisure, arts and cultural assets.

The framework is an opportunity for a paradigm shift in the way that we plan for and fund community facilities so that communities benefit from these investments now and into the future, and we avoid unnecessary duplication of resources.

Sport Waikato, Creative Waikato, Trust Waikato and the WEL Energy Trust are all supportive of the concept.

It will now be up to all councils to consider formally whether they accept the forum's recommendations.

Under the framework, individual councils remain the decision makers over how much they are prepared to contribute to individual projects.

Community-led engagement

Sport Waikato CEO Matthew Cooper, recently returned from a study of neighbourhood-led development in Canada, told the forum meeting that practices there could well have relevance to our region and that he'd be keen to work with councils on this.

Taking a neighbourhood-led or community-led approach could get greater public engagement than having central agencies develop ideas and seeking comment, Matthew suggested.

He looked at how Canadian "neighbourhoods" (as opposed to "communities") got together and worked on various initiatives.

"Partnership with funders and other stakeholders was critical to success," he said. There was also a need to strike a balance between taking a long-term view and getting runs on the board.

Matthew noted that many community development "players" in the Waikato could be confusing for the public and questioned whether various agencies knew enough about what each other are doing. So a more collaborative and common approach to community-led development could be useful.

National waterscape

The forum received the first in a new series of comprehensive reports on local, regional and national water issues from the regional council's science and strategy director Tracey May.

The reports will from now be at not less than six monthly intervals, reflecting the forum's desire to be kept up with developments in this fast-changing and increasingly important space.

Tracey noted how new Government direction places pressure on the region to improve the swimmability of rivers and lakes in coming years, measured by e.coli standards.

The regional council's chief executive Vaughan Payne noted there were concerns with the development of government direction in regard to swimmability targets without a comprehensive assessment of the potential cost implications for regional communities. Vaughan also said it was frustrating to see the new standards focusing only on e.coli when local science says the other three significant contaminants (nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment) should also be looked at.

A report to the forum said: "While the direction in regard to water management is being set at a national level, implementation is more and more being passed on to regional and local levels to deliver, with costs of implementation and compliance being borne by our ratepayers."

Tracey noted the council's new freshwater strategy was putting a long term focus on how to manage water in the region generally through advocacy, smarter methods and better information.

She also outlined progress being made in the Healthy Rivers Wai Ora Proposed Plan Change 1 for the Waikato and Waipa rivers, noting hearings involving independent commissioners were due to start in May/June of next year.

Havelock North

An update on the inquiry into the Havelock North water supply contamination inquiry noted criticisms of the local regional and district councils after stage 1 of the inquiry.

Stage 2, currently underway, will provide recommendations about managing water supply across New Zealand. It is not due to report till December.

Implications for Waikato are therefore not currently clear but a report to the forum said a different approach could be expected in the approach taken by drinking water assessors given a finding they had been too "hands off" in the past. It was also likely greater scrutiny of bores will be expected, the report said.

One good sign for Waikato is that a meeting of agencies in our region felt that many of the issues raised regarding communication and liaison between agencies around Havelock North weren't present in our region.

But the meeting also agreed a range of measures related to liaison and data to further ensure safety of drinking water supplies in the Waikato.

Waikato Regional Services Funding

The regional council advised it will be seeking formal feedback from local councils on how the Waikato Regional Services Fund might operate in future.

Under an agreement with local councils, the regional council collects rates on behalf of the region and uses the funds to support a number of rescue services.

The regional council proposes a more specific name of the Emergency Regional Services Fund.

The forum agreed with the general idea of maintaining the status quo when it came to funding and levels of service.

Alan Livingston, chair

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