

MAYORAL COLUMN

GROWING OUR DISTRICT & POPULATION IS KEY

Wairoa is a great town. My love for Wairoa is what motivated me to stand for Council in 2010 – because I wanted to help make Wairoa the best it can be.

I knew our declining population would be our death knell and I campaigned on positive change to halt the decline and attract more people to Wairoa to increase our population.

The 2018 population Census data shows Wairoa's population increased by 477 (8,367) compared to the 2013 census (7,890). Our 'Estimated Resident Population' for 2019 is 8,680.



Mayor Craig Little

This predicted growth goes against Statistics NZ 2013 forecast that Wairoa would continue to lose its population at a rate of around 1% per year.

Increasing our population is the only way we can reduce rates, a simple formula of more people to share the costs of running the district with.

This population turn around is attributed to Wairoa's ability to attract residents by enhancing and growing our district with as little impact on ratepayers as possible.

It would be easier to do nothing, and manage the downhill spiral but is that really what people want?

I know for myself, we can't afford to let our town die, because we have seen the consequences of this. People will not move here if we are not progressive.

Council is just like a household; costs are regularly increasing, and our ratepayers need to face the reality that rates will go up.

We are a large isolated district with a small ratepaying base so of course our costs per capita will be higher than our bigger neighbours. We cannot be naive about this. Yet we continue to punch above our weight as acknowledged by external sources, and despite our small ratebase I believe our rates are good value for money.

Council received a petition for zero rates, for a second time, at the recent Council forum. I questioned why it was presented twice as the petition contents had not changed and I have never heard of a petition being submitted twice. Nonetheless, as Mayor I allowed this to happen as there were additional signatures.

Both petitions were signed by people from around New Zealand and the world, Council has not verified a lot of the names as there were no addresses and it would be a huge cost to ensure the signatories are genuine - which would be a requirement from Local Government New Zealand.

This petition suggests we, as elected members, didn't consider the option of a rates freeze which is offensive as we worked hard to get the rates down.

We all wanted a 0% rates increase but that would mean an unrealistic reduction in the level and range of services we currently offer and a huge financial burden on future generations.

Council has acknowledged it wants to review its rating model to ensure the appropriate formula is being used.

We have also been clear that we would like our community to join this review by being part of the Ratepayer Stakeholder Group.

It is disappointing Mr Olsen, the petition organiser, turned down the invitation by Council to be part of this stakeholder group, as it would have been a golden opportunity to be part of the solution.

When Councillors began working on our Annual Plan, we were facing a \$1.5 million increase, just based on cost increases around roading maintenance, emergency works, Three Waters and landfill, that was without inflation increases.

The original petition was received by resolution to be considered, and while a zero increase was not achieved, we did manage to reduce the increase down to a 5% average.

Some of the Councils that said they were going to have a zero

percent increase didn't, and others have increased their borrowings or taken from reserves.

In Wairoa we are being realistic, living within our means, acting prudently and not setting ourselves up for failure.

Wairoa's debt level per head of population is around \$1,600. Do we want debt levels at over \$20,000 like some of New Zealand's bigger cities? What a burden to put on future generations.

I was disappointed the petition wasn't more solutions based. It would be like me running a petition for a 0% electricity or insurance increase when I don't understand the implications of what I am asking for.

When you compare rates to electricity, fuel or insurance, rates are good value as rather than just supplying one service, rates cover a range of services such as the i-Site, library, footpaths, drainage, animal control, regulatory services, roading, rubbish, Three Waters etc. Plus, the Gaiety Theatre, Museum and Community Centre receive considerable financial support from the Council.

It is healthy for people in our community to share their views and opinions and petitions. That is what democracy is all about. However, people need to understand what they are talking about and I urge anyone who is interested to read the rating act, legislation and Council's Long-Term Plan.

Our Council was elected by our community on the mandate to grow and progress our district which we cannot do with 0% rates increase.

Our longest serving councillor, Denise Eaglesome Karekare, told me that when she was a first-time elected member, she and the other councillors were feeling pretty chuffed because they had a nil rate increase. However, the following year saw a 15% rate increase because of that decision.

The then Mayor, Les Probert, had forewarned the councillors this is what would happen, but in a democracy numbers rule.

History and data from Wairoa and other Councils backs this up, a 0% rates increase will impact future generations, where does this playing catch up stop?

Regarding the way I chaired the meeting that the second petition was brought to. Council will not accept statements that are not factual and will pull up incorrect statements.

We will not work on hearsay and assumptions. We have to work on the facts, or we will be pulled up by the auditors, or worse a commissioner will be appointed to run Council.

We are ordinary local people who put our names forward to do the best for our community. We pay rates ourselves and never forget, the community are the people who voted us in as councillors.

This group told us we should stop new projects like the CBD upgrade. For every \$1 Council has spent on the CBD upgrade we have received \$10 back from Central Government. This is in line with our Long-Term Plan. Would you have rather we turned down the \$4.8 million?

This group also made unfounded accusations of Council not doing its core business or being over-staffed, staff not working hard enough, too many consultants etc. For the record our staff numbers are what is required to carry out our legislative duties and keep our district running.

Staff salaries are not set by Council, they are set by the guidelines of the independent 'Strategic pay', and of course there are times when consultants are needed to provide a particular skill or for peer review.

Council is working collaboratively with its partners and we are in a stronger position than we have been in more than a decade.

We have turned around our negative trajectory. Some of our critics have only recently moved to Wairoa and perhaps do not understand what it was like more than 10-years ago and how much effort has gone into rebuilding our district.

I am pleased people are actively taking an interest in what is going on, you may be councillors of our future, but I do urge you to do the necessary groundwork so you are aware of the circumstances Councils have to operate under.

I don't want to be responsible for living in a town where the last one turns the lights off, and this Council is doing all it can to ensure that doesn't happen- and so far succeeding.

FOR YOUR DIARY

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Tue, 4 August: 1.30pm

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Tue, 11 August: 1.30pm

FINANCE, AUDIT & RISK COMMITTEE

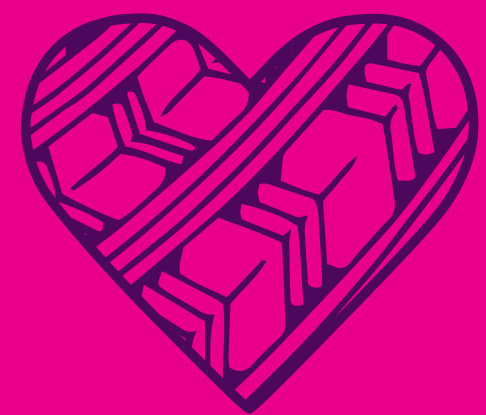
Tue, 18 August: 1.30pm



CONTACT US

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Spend \$30 or more at a local shop and be in for a chance to win one of ten \$100 vouchers.

The draw will run for 10 weeks. Winners are announced each Friday.