

## MAYORAL COLUMN



Mayor Craig Little

### THREE WATERS REFORM PROGRAMME

Providing safe drinking water and appropriate management of wastewater and stormwater is paramount.

I commend Central Government on its Three Waters Reform (drinking water, wastewater, stormwater) Programme - a three-year programme to reform Local Government Three Waters service delivery arrangements. Reviewing processes and looking at other ways of doing things is always important.

However, my concern is that we don't

throw the 'baby' out with the bathwater.

The Havelock North water contamination in 2016 was a terrible tragedy. The waterborne disease outbreak resulted in 5,500 of the town's residents becoming ill with campylobacteriosis, 45 people were subsequently hospitalised and contamination was a possible contribution to four deaths.

It is important though that this one incident does not cause a knee jerk reaction that holds the rest of the country to ransom.

While local authorities are aware of the Three Waters Reform, I have not seen evidence of the Department of Internal Affairs taking our people, our iwi and our communities on this journey, which is very worrying considering the ramifications.

If this lack of engagement and lack of information sharing is a sign of what is to come, then I have major fears.

### MY BIGGEST CONCERN IS THAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT WILL LOSE CONTROL OVER ITS THREE WATERS AND ASSETS.

A centralised Three Waters provider could be the beginning of the end of Local Government. Is this amalgamation through the back door by slowly removing the functions of Local Government? If Three Waters is taken away from Local Government what is next, roading? regulatory functions? Is the future of Local Government a little office run on behalf of Central Government?

The 2016 overthrown Hawke's Bay amalgamation referendum saw two thirds of Hawke's Bay residents voting overwhelmingly against a proposal to amalgamate all five of the Councils in Hawke's Bay. Our local MP Stuart Nash was vehemently against amalgamation.

It is important now that these same residents are aware of what is happening in the Three Waters space as this reform is far bigger than the Hawke's Bay amalgamation proposal.

Currently 67 different councils own and operate the majority of the drinking water, wastewater and stormwater services across New Zealand. Plus, there could be ramifications for private water suppliers who run schemes, marae, even farmers.

Local government is facing urgent challenges in the provision of these services including: funding infrastructure deficits, complying with safety standards and environmental expectations, building resilience to natural hazards and climate change into three waters networks, and supporting growth.

The Government wants a comprehensive, system-wide reform to achieve lasting benefits suggesting a number of multi-regional entities with a bottom line of public ownership. The exact size, shape and design of these entities is still being worked through and overseas models are being examined.

Creating another organisation to manage Three Waters is huge for New Zealand and this is being done wholly by a desktop exercise using WICS (Water Industry Commission for Scottish) as a model and suggesting Taumatua Arowai, the new Water Services Regulator, attain international Water Standards

To create a platform of this significance is massive and the time frame expectation is within the current election period. Surely this is so significant one would assume this would also require an economic reform?

Rather than a new cumbersome organisation/s surely the best way to achieve this is through Local Government which represents grassroots New Zealand. We know our communities, we know what they need and how to deliver to meet those needs. Central Government should be using Local Government knowledge and intel - not reinventing the wheel.

This needs to be about identifying the problem and fixing it, not creating bigger problems.

Rather than Local Government losing functions, Central Government should be adding functions such as housing to our portfolios. We are witnessing evidence of the housing crisis - I do not want that for our Three Waters.

Wairoa is being touted as one of the winners in an amalgamated water supply situation. But as we all know, as in the case of Auckland, which had limited water resources and spiralling costs, these predictions are often wrong.

Promises are always made, ie your staff numbers and plant will remain the same- but I guarantee when savings need to be made Wairoa and other small communities will be where the promises are broken.

### WE HAVE SEEN THIS BEFORE, WAIROA'S GEOGRAPHICAL DIVIDE MEANS CENTRALISATION AND REGIONALISATION NEVER WORKS FOR US.

We are told there could be cost savings by not having 67 local authorities each running their own Three Waters services. However, for an isolated area like Wairoa we have to balance that against access to service.

What happens when there is a storm event or emergency and we no longer have specialist staff based in Wairoa because the service is centralised. We would be playing second fiddle to bigger centres.

I am sceptical of cost savings as it means someone always misses out and history has shown it is often us. A new water authority will not be responsible to local communities despite the reassurances that are made. Communities like Wairoa will lose control and autonomy and become bottom of the pecking order.

I'm not suggesting Local Government is perfect, but at least our local communities can have a say on infrastructure and how services are delivered.

### THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WITH THREE WATERS SERVICE DELIVERY IN NEW ZEALAND IS LACK OF FUNDING. THAT IS WHAT NEEDS TO BE SORTED OUT FIRST. CREATING ANOTHER NEW UNWIELDY BEAST THAT WILL INVOLVE PEOPLE BEING CHARGED YET ANOTHER BILL IS NOT A SOLUTION.

Central Government is continually changing legislation and requirements and it is impossible for Local Government to deliver on the changes without being given additional funding to do so.

Central Government has to look at itself before it introduces radical change.

For the past 100-years while the Central Government spending trajectory has continually gone up, Central Government funding to Local Government has remained the same, literally flatlined.

We have a system where the Government funds NZTA Waka Kotahi, roading, through a financially subsidised rate. We need to consider something similar so local communities are funded so they don't lose control.

Wairoa is making the most of the post-COVID \$11.04 million stimulus funding for Three Waters work which was part of the Government's national Three Waters investment funding package, of which \$50 million was set aside for Hawke's Bay's four local authorities.

This will go a long way to fixing some of Wairoa's shortfalls and I suggest the Department of Internal Affairs look at the benefits this direct funding to communities is achieving and consider more of the same rather than the cost of developing an over-the-top new regime.

We will be watching the Three Waters space very carefully and encourage you to do the same.

## FOR YOUR DIARY

### PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

#### COUNCIL MEETING

Tue, 9 February: 1.30pm

#### MATANGIRAU RESERVES BOARD

Mon, 15 February: 3.30pm



#### CONTACT US

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## 2021-2031 LONG TERM PLAN PRE-ENGAGEMENT

We are inviting you to give feedback on how and where Council should spend its money. Find out more and tell us what you think by visiting a community meeting or open session.

#### COMMUNITY MEETING

Thur, 28<sup>th</sup> Jan, 6pm-7pm  
War Memorial Hall

#### OPEN SESSION

Fri, 29<sup>th</sup> Jan, 10am-2pm  
Mahia Boating & Fishing club

To give feedback online, visit [www.consultations.nz/wdc](http://www.consultations.nz/wdc)

Please note, the iwi meeting on Friday, 29<sup>th</sup> January has been cancelled.

