

# ***Waiheke Community Board's Submission to the Regional Governance Commission***

## **Stay part of Auckland but with greater autonomy**

Waiheke became part of Auckland City Council by legislation in 1989. The Waiheke Community Board consists of five elected members and one appointed member, being the Councillor for the Hauraki Gulf Islands Ward. The Community Board's area of jurisdiction includes Rakino Island, which has a small resident population but about 175 rate-able properties and large visitor population including thousands of boat owners. The Hauraki Gulf Island's councillor's responsibilities include Great Barrier Island and Rakino. However Waiheke has a long and proud tradition of being independent. Many residents remember the Waiheke County Council days prior to enforced amalgamation with Auckland City Council.

We are an island community, geographically separate and relatively isolated. Surrounded by water, we recognise the need to protect and promote our waterways and the Hauraki Gulf. The importance of our environment and its national significance is recognised in government legislation through the Hauraki Marine Park Act 2000.

As an island community we have our own emergency management procedures, recognising that contact with other parts of Auckland can be lost in an emergency situation. For example last year we had our ferry services cut off for some time through bad weather; in 2006 there was a Foot and Mouth outbreak scare.

We are a diverse community, demographically dissimilar to any other part of Auckland. While there are, for instance, relatively few Asian or Pacific Island people living on Waiheke, a significant proportion of our population was born overseas. Around 17 percent of our population are Maori – though very few are Ngati Paoa, the tangata whenua of the island. Despite this our community has built our own marae – on council land - which is dedicated to Nga Hau e Wha. That is, it is open to all people and it is a marae for newcomers and people of all cultural backgrounds alike. While we may lack a truly diverse population by greater Auckland standards our community is demonstrably bi-cultural and welcoming of all cultures.

It is our view that we are inextricably tied to Auckland. A significant percentage of the population commutes to Auckland each day to work, with others travelling for a variety of reasons including shopping, visiting, education, sport, social occasions and medical appointments. Approximately 15% of the community, over 1000 people every day, travels to Auckland on any week day. Other than private transport, our visitors generally travel to the Island on ferries from Downtown Auckland or from Half Moon Bay. For logistical reasons, it is sensible that we remain part of a wider Auckland regional governance.

Waiheke Island, and the Hauraki Gulf as a whole, is a prime New Zealand visitor destination. It is Auckland's playground, a place where both overseas tourists and more local visitors recreate; where Aucklanders look for something different from the isthmus. We are an asset to greater Auckland, but only if we are allowed to retain our uniqueness.

There is a considerable village and rural aspect to both Waiheke and Rakino. This is a far cry from metropolitan Auckland which is quite clearly demarcated into the Central Business District (CBD) and surrounding suburbs. In addition, our land area and coastlines are extensive.

Although Waiheke has a permanent population of over 8,000 people, the local infrastructure must be able to support a summer population of 30,000 – 40,000 people. There are also a growing number of day-trippers (including bus tours) coming to the Island and these numbers can boost the local resident population by some hundreds or thousands on any given day. Fullers passenger ferry service report a peak of 5000 people a day travelling to Waiheke between Christmas and New Year this year while the vehicular ferry from Half Moon Bay recorded an extra 8000 cars being transported to the island during the Christmas/New Year period.

Despite our small resident population, the importance of a separate Community Board for Waiheke has not been lost on the other Community Boards within Auckland City Council and, recently, they have fought hard for us to have pay parity with them. The Community Board representations to the Remuneration Authority recognised how significant local representation and a local community voice are to our community. They have also recognised that serving a smaller population does not signify a lower work load for elected representatives and in fact, often signifies the opposite.

Waiheke Community Board members would have among the highest workloads of community boards across the region as, unlike the representatives in some larger, more anonymous ward; we are in constant daily contact with our constituents. The people in our community actively participate in community affairs. The public forum section of our monthly community board meetings often are well attended and visiting council staff often comment on how lively and engaged our local community is at public forum.

In the 2007 election our voter turn-out was 57% - on the isthmus the average was 38%. Our island has three local papers and local issues are debated fiercely in the letters to the editor section. We have 198 community organisations on this island that range from our sports clubs and play groups through to the elected trustees who govern our health services. The amount of volunteer participation and community engagement is phenomenal for a small population but is predictable for an island community where self-reliance and resilience is a way of life.

For these reasons alone we believe that Waiheke must have a political voice that has a decision-making role for the island. The decision of the Local Government Commission

to amalgamate Waiheke County with Auckland City in 1989 has meant that we are now very dependent on Auckland City Council or another local authority for most of the infrastructure that we need as a community and particularly as a community that is highly dependent on the visitor industry for its economic well-being.

Despite the work of the Community Board and the staff at the local Waiheke Service Centre, much of the skills, expertise, decision making opportunities and bureaucratic administration have been taken over by the greater local authority. We believe that it would be extremely difficult and very expensive for Waiheke to ever regain local government independence. However, if Waiheke were to gain a higher degree of local political control with all the associated costs of greater autonomy, it would be entirely reasonable that we should expect financial support from a greater Auckland council, particularly given the infrastructural and service needs of recreational visitors from the region and Waiheke's pivotal role in attracting overseas visitors to the region.

## **INDEPENDENCE**

There are many in our community who would like to see Waiheke have local government independence, perhaps as part of a Hauraki Gulf District Council. There are 65 islands in the Hauraki Gulf with a collective land area of 50,089 hectares. Great Barrier is New Zealand's fourth largest island in terms of land area. Waiheke is New Zealand's third largest island in terms of population. Both Waiheke and the Barrier are larger in area than Rarotonga, American Samoa, Niue and Nauru. There are approximately 750 businesses on the Hauraki Gulf islands.

People who support independence in local government believe that our best interests as a small island community are not served by being amalgamated into a larger city council let alone some form of Greater Auckland council where our voice may not be heard. Many believe that to be the case now with Auckland City Council.

To quote from Auckland City Council's Hauraki Gulf Islands Strategic Plan:

*'The issues and challenges that arise in the islands differ from those in the rest of Auckland. Some are the result of the islands' geographic isolation while others are due to their proximity to Auckland. ... We recognise how important the sense of belonging to the local community is to people who live in the Hauraki Gulf.'*

A recent public meeting held on Waiheke to consider the matter of regional governance, attracted about 150 people. It was overwhelmingly supported by those present that, in the case of any regional re-structuring, the Waiheke Community Board, or similar, should not only be retained but have stronger delegated authority. Further, 80-90% of the audience believed that Waiheke should be allowed to break away from Auckland City because the City has not lived up to its promises of 'greater efficiency, effectiveness and accountability'.

## **AMALGAMATION WITH ANOTHER LOCAL AUTHORITY**

In an attempt to address some of the issues outlined above one member of the Waiheke Community Board, as a private citizen exercising his individual rights, has initiated a petition to the Commission requesting that consideration be given to amalgamating Waiheke with the Thames-Coromandel District Council (TCDC). The Waiheke Community Board as a whole does not support this option and, accordingly, has passed a resolution to this effect. However, the recent draft proposal by Auckland City Council to abolish its community boards and many elected councillor positions and to replace them with an appointed advocates and a neighbourhood councillor based in a city-side ward such as (in the case of the Hauraki Gulf) the Commercial Business District (CBD) must give the supporters of this proposal some ammunition.

If the people of Waiheke wish to retain any sense of local democracy through legally constituted democratic elections, or wish to retain any local decision-making powers and possibly even enhance their delegated responsibilities, then at this stage, amalgamation with a District Council outside the current boundaries of the Auckland Region would provide the best option. The Community Board has not supported this to date, in the hope that the model for a re-structured Auckland region will provide for a strengthened community board or similar. We do not support 'appointments' to positions when, by their very nature, they demand a high level of democratic accountability and in our view, this can only be satisfied by democratic elections.

Neither do we support the concept of 'neighbourhood advocates' who are appointed by elected representatives, as outlined in the Auckland City Council draft submission. Individuals in appointed positions are also prone to capture by some individuals or local interest groups. This does not provide for a healthy democracy.

The suggestion to amalgamate Waiheke with a relatively small district council outside the Auckland region may sound a little inordinate under the current circumstances, however, faced with no or little local democratic representation and no decision-making capabilities, we believe that the proposal could receive much greater community support than it does currently.

## **GREATER AUTONOMY**

Our community is concerned that, should there be further amalgamation of city councils within the greater Auckland area, Waiheke will lose even those small elements of local decision-making and autonomy that we have retained so far. Though there have undoubtedly been many benefits for us from being part of Auckland City Council, and our relationship with the Council is generally positive, we are aware that we are considered a small and sometimes irritating addition to the City.

Over the years, it has been obvious that, at times, it is hard for Council staff and even the city side councillors to understand that one size does not fit all and that what works on the isthmus and in the CBD is not necessarily going to be successful in the Gulf. Having dealt with such issues in the past, we are now extremely concerned that should

there be a greater Auckland Council, with staff and elected representatives even further removed from the Island communities, then this problem will be greatly exacerbated. It is our firm view that a degree of meaningful autonomy for Waiheke in regard to local issues is the only way this can be avoided.

The community board model has worked well on Waiheke. The Board is supported by an active and highly politicised community and there is a well developed local community sub-structure, with active residents' and ratepayers' associations and other interest groups. A wider community forum (established by the Community Board) also feeds ideas directly to the Board. The various local community groups are well supported and the Community Board meetings are always well attended.

We are aware that some of the community boards across the region do not attract many attendees to either their regular board meetings or to other public meetings and occasions that they might organise. Waiheke is in direct contrast to this. The Board's work is under constant scrutiny from the general public, specific lobby groups (often with widely differing agendas) and the three local community newspapers. A wide range of individuals and groups also take advantage of public forum at the monthly Board meetings to put their views. Because the community resembles a small semi-rural area, elected members are always readily available to constituents and mixing with them both professionally and socially on a daily basis. This automatically creates a very high degree of public accountability. Taking into consideration that members of the public do not always share the same ideas, the Board feels that they work particularly hard to resolve conflicting viewpoints and to create solutions that will be widely accepted.

It is our view that the Waiheke Community Board as a whole, and its individual members, are already actively engaged in consulting with the public, bearing in mind that we, as elected representatives are ultimately accountable for any decisions made. There are also multiple opportunities for community participation should people wish to take a more active role in community affairs. Admittedly there are other ways to consult with the community but consultants are invariably more expensive than Community Board members; generally rely on the local knowledge that Board members can provide and have considerably less community credibility.

The Waiheke Community Board acknowledges that there is merit in a greater Auckland Council, particularly from the perspective of the isthmus wards and the other councils in the region. There is obviously a great need to improve the provision of transport and transport facilities and to ensure adequate water supply and sewage management in the region. This is of economic significance not only to Auckland, but also the rest of New Zealand.

However, issues in the Hauraki Gulf are not the same as those on the mainland. Although Waiheke is currently part of Auckland City Council, it is very different from any other ward. The Hauraki Gulf Islands District Plan is a separate section of the wider Auckland City District Plan and acknowledges the different environment and appropriate management of the Islands. Gulf transport and roading issues are fundamentally

different from those currently causing chaos in the city and water and wastewater management are based on different systems. On Waiheke each householder relies on catching rainwater and we do not have reticulated sewerage systems. All households have septic and/or on site waste water systems. This means that our community leads the way in solid waste disposal and water conservation as each home must manage these issues for themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a considerable village and rural aspect to both Waiheke and Rakino. Two thirds of Waiheke is farmland or vineyards. While there are obviously significant transport and economic links with the City, the Islands represent a different environment and lifestyle from metropolitan Auckland, which is quite clearly demarcated into the CBD and surrounding suburbs and may have issues which cross ward boundaries. In addition, local authority issues, services, policies and plans are also quite different in the Gulf.

Community Boards such as Waiheke and Great Barrier currently have the advantage of a clearly defined 'community of interest' by virtue of their geographical isolation and different needs. Notwithstanding this they have an interest in the economic and social health of the rest of the region. The Waiheke community wishes to retain its Community Board and councillor representation in town and seeks greater delegated authority from whatever parent body is ultimately set up. We believe that it is vital that locally elected people can make legally binding decisions on our behalf.