

The Super City must die? – thoughts on Auckland local government amalgamation 10 years on.

by [Mike Lee](#) · Published 08/11/2020 · Updated 25/11/2022

‘The proud tower’. The former ASB Bank HQ at 135 Albert Street now the HQ of Auckland Council – it’s purchase emblematic of all that is wrong about the Super city.

A bit about my background: I have lived on Waiheke on and off since 1979.



www.NZEmpowered.com

I was a merchant navy officer and raised my family here in the 80s and early 90s. I have also spent 28 years in Auckland regional government. Nine years in the Auckland Council, 19 years in the Auckland Regional Council. Six years as its last chairman.

The ARC under my leadership was largely cooperative with the local government reform. We were adverse to being seen to trying to defend our jobs and we did have faith in a sensible outcome by the Royal Commission. What we got in the end though, was quite a different entity to what the Royal Commission recommended.

Furthermore, I soon came to realise, that the abolition of the Auckland Regional council, which first founded as the ARA in 1963, by the visionary Dove Myer Robinson with its regional planning mission to regulate land use and subdivision in a sustainable way, was not a mere by-product of the Super city reform but that actually the abolition of the ARC was one of the primary objectives of the whole exercise.

That being said a major contribution platform for success of the new Super City, increasing public transport, especially the rescue and renaissance of rail public transport, the electrification of the rail network, the City Rail Link, the redevelopment of the Wynyard Waterfront, the provision of a network of outstanding regional parks, including Whakanewha Regional Park on Waiheke, and the income from blue chip investments 100% publicly owned Ports of Auckland Ltd and a \$350m Diversified Investment Fund, was the legacy to the Super City from the ARC.

However despite the provision of this enormously important platform and momentum for Auckland largely driven the ARC, and despite a hopeful start under mayor Len Brown, the improvements achieved by efficiencies upon which the whole proposal was based have not materialised.

Moreover the balance between the public and ordinary ratepayers has been rebalanced significantly away from the governed – in the interests of those who govern. Those who spend the money rather than those who provide it.

So has the Super City worked? Well that depends on how you view it.

From the perspective of the overwhelming majority of Aucklanders it has not been a success. Public opinion surveys by Auckland Council itself indicate very **low public trust in council decision making and approval**. This was at the last record published if I recall was around 18 or 19%.

This highlights aspect what the late Professor Ian Shirley called a growing ‘democracy deficit.’ A decline in transparency and a weakening of public accountability.

This is due both to the sheer size of the organisation but also its culture, which it has to be said is not a good culture – in which using its extremely well resourced communication resources to spin and manufacture messages that serve the interests of the council – rather than objective truth.

Similarly, speaking both as a former Auckland councillor, and a director of Auckland Transport for six years, (I have seen CCOs from the inside), the information provided by bureaucrats to those who nominally are the decision makers is more often than not rationed, processed and almost always without contestable or alternative advice offered.

But there is another perspective on whether the Super City has worked and is working. That perspective is not that of the average person in the street but the rarified corporate world of big business. And it is important to remember that it was the lobbying by big business – not necessarily, as I have subsequently found out confined to New Zealand – that persuaded governments of both parties to institute the radical reforms which created the Auckland Council.

Given the Super City is so unpopular you might find it intriguing that political thought leaders, the media, government politicians have been extremely reluctant to even raise questions – or even review the performance of the Council.

Why is this I wonder?

One reason could be that the Super City has engineered a massive transfer of wealth from the pockets of Auckland ratepayers directly to very large, often Australian based corporates mainly in the construction industry e.g. Downers, Fletchers and others, which have secured huge tenders for work historically carried out by council workers themselves e.g. Rubbish collection contracts, parks and reserves, toilets maintenance contracts, operating trains, even buying library books – and as well a vast range of outsourced services e.g. legal, engineering and planning sectors.

Putting it in a world historic context, I believe the Super City is an end result of the neoliberal reforms which began in the 80s. These had as one of its central maxims, less government in business – and more business in government. It is the next best thing to the ideal form of local government for big private, vested interests. The Super City is certainly ‘business friendly’ – but most importantly it is big business friendly. On the other hand small business, e.g. retailers, tends to get trampled on by the council and its CCOs.

At the same time, in achieving that this big business friendly Super City, the council’s senior bureaucracy has been allowed to award themselves with lavish salaries, as well as privileged travel and hospitality benefits.

As well as imposing their ideal council on Auckland – central government policy makers and private sector lobbyists like the NZ Property Council have created an environment in which Auckland (at least prior to the Covid 19 pandemic) has been encouraged to grow disproportionately to the rest of New Zealand mainly through external immigration.

Auckland (again before Covid) had I understand the 2nd highest level of immigration sourced population growth in the OECD. Raw population on this scale growth enables the appearance of economic prosperity through GDP growth, boosting EFTPOS transactions, the sale of used and new cars, and of course boosting the housing market and the deregulated property development sector. The council itself is a leading driver of GDP with major contracts required to try to keep up with a rapidly growing population, road building, cycle ways and other public works. The explicit reasons for high growth policies have never been debated let alone approved by the New Zealand electorate.

Interestingly in Australia which has also seen very high immigration in recent years, I was intrigued to learn that the leading advocates for high growth have been the telcos (so more cell phone sales and monthly phone accounts) and of all businesses, the grocery chains. How interesting.

There are only two grocery chains in NZ. Foodstuffs which is as its website states is ‘proudly NZ’ and Countdown a subsidiary of Woolworths Australia. These dominate the NZ market in a duopoly, with grocery prices significantly higher than those in Australia. Are grocery stores that influential? ‘Proudly NZ’ Foodstuffs is actually a type of franchise model. As a friend who works in a related sector told me the NZ grocery chain business is worth \$22bn a year. The owners of Foodstuffs constitute most of the people who fill the top 50 places in the NBR Rich List. As he explained to me of course grocery chains support high immigration, they also support the intensified urban development policies being pushed by Auckland council which makes strategically placed supermarkets that more profitable.

The Super City is very much a product of all this. Literally. I was at a function at the Sky Casino not long after the establishment of the Super City. The occasion was a celebration of the purchase of the *NZ Chinese Herald*, by the *NZ Herald*. The sale of a NZ owned entity to a foreign one. The foreign one being the NZ Herald which was Australian owned APN, the NZ entity was the Chinese Herald!.

At the reception small talk, where one mills about with a glass of wine, I was introduced to a young Australian APN executive. He was interested to learn that I was an Auckland Councillor and volunteered to me rather proudly that APN Australia had made a major effort lobbying the government for the Super City. While I nodded politely I thought to myself what the hell has the way Auckland local government got to do with an Australian business. Well probably more than I will ever know.

But this also but excludes the consequences of high population in which the privileged elements of the private sector are able to reap the profits and externalise the costs onto the public through the need for very expensive infrastructure and also impacts on the environment and citizens, ordinary ratepayers quality of life.

Here on Waiheke, prior to Covid a huge momentum was building, post the unitary plan, which itself was essentially was a massive deregulatory exercise driven by both the government and the council to encourage property development, including on Waiheke as a part of the city's intensive urban development policy.

This brings me to the Waiheke Area Plan. This has no statutory basis but it is designed to presage folding Waiheke into the City Unitary Plan. The city bureaucrats and presumably the shadowy lobbyists who talk to them have big plans for Waiheke.

I write in regard to Auckland Council's brief and perfunctory 'Draft Waiheke Area Plan' public consultation. *Gulf News* readers may recall I warned the public about what the council was planning last year. Clearly nothing has changed since then. The opening sentence of the feedback form, (so revealing of Auckland Council's manipulative culture) states the plan is "led by the Waiheke Local Board" and "is a 30-year vision...to ensure a more sustainable and more liveable future". Frankly those claims are not true. In fact it is the direct opposite. The essence of the plan was conceived in Auckland Council's headquarters tower by planning bureaucrats. It is all about driving the non-sustainable growth of Waiheke Island, facilitated by a series of hugely expensive sewerage reticulation schemes which Waiheke ratepayers will be forced to pay for. All the rest is secondary to those two intimately connected goals. The real plan is to turn Waiheke into something much closer to a crowded city suburb. The trick in the disingenuous public consultation process is to contrive a narrative that rather than reticulation and suburbanisation being imposed on Waiheke by city planners, it is in fact the brain child of the local board – and if the feedback responses can be finessed well enough – even the public itself. Do not believe it.

The Council officers in their public consultation meetings have been evidently careful to downplay the real agenda but it hasn't taken many question by alert members of the public to draw out the real objectives.

This agenda is unwittingly revealed in the 'Have Your Say' feedback form where after some vague questions about "vision", the 5th and 6th questions (leading questions I might add) get to the point. They make it clear that the council considers it a bad thing that most of us live in "single family homes on large sections" (perusal of their planning maps confirm that by "large sections" the planners are not talking about mansions on lifestyle broad acres – no, just the rest of us).

The diligent Waiheke Islander completing the questionnaire is then deftly steered to suggest alternative forms of housing. I know from the numerous confidential closed-door briefing sessions I attended last year, the answer the bureaucrats are fishing for is for more "intensive" development (à la Auckland suburbia). i.e. infill, units and apartment buildings, (including no doubt shoebox apartments) initially focussed on Ostend, and planned to begin in Oneroa, high-rise tourism accommodation.

But as this is quite impossible with our present onsite sewage treatment system, so we have the next leading question wherein quite disingenuously the council claims it is concerned about maintaining the island's water

quality and “the health of the Hauraki Gulf”. The behind-closed doors solution to this according to council planners is reticulated sewerage to be progressively rolled out in packets across the island.

But it doesn't take much reflection to realise reticulated sewage will be disastrous for our island and our coastal waters. Just look at the Waitemata Harbour where more than 2.2 million cubic metres of raw sewage, and sewage contaminated storm water is spilled into the isthmus streams and harbours every year from the city's reticulated system. The council bureaucrats know this as much as anyone but they know reticulation will open the way for quantum increases in property development, much more people and many more dwellings, And just think how much ratepayers' money the council's private construction contractors will be eyeing up. Then there will be the disruption and environmental impacts of the construction itself which is likely to go on for years – how long? Well, have a look at the simple culvert Downers are trying to build outside the refuse transfer station. How long have they been at that now, – over a year? And how much is that costing? It would be a bad joke if the implications did not constitute such a grave threat to our island way of life – and our environment. The people of Waiheke do have an alternative to the Super City agenda and its “Waiheke Area Plan” and that is to protect, maintain and where necessary improve our own sustainable onsite wastewater and roof tank systems. The Waiheke Area Plan public consultation ends this evening but the battle for our island is only beginning.'

One cannot predict what impact the Covid epidemic will have on our future. But apart from what is coming down the pipeline as a result of the Area Plan even now plans are being laid by people close to the Council and to DOC and rather naïve supporters to divest control in effect ownership of the Hauraki Gulf waters around Waiheke out to absentee manawhenua groups in so called 'Ahu Moana'.

Despite some hoped for benefits from this gigantic merger of Auckland's eight former councils in my assessment after 10 years, one of the years having the advantage or disadvantage of being out of the council the Super City is in my considered view the worst thing that has happened to Auckland.

That the Super City must die is not a statement of inevitability I'm afraid, too big to fall, unless there is a major change in the way the politics works in NZ it is unlikely to go easily.

Auckland supercity 15 years on: success or failure?

From [Nine To Noon](#), 9:07 am on 7 May 2025

Nine To Noon 7 May 2025

Many Aucklanders say the supercity model has failed, with progress on delivering transport and infrastructure and solutions a particular sticking point for residents according to new research from Auckland University.

The findings come as Auckland leaders gather to examine the region's progress since the creation of the supercity 15 years ago.

The survey shows Aucklanders overwhelmingly support a long-term infrastructure plan, and there is near-universal agreement on protecting the natural environment.

However only half of those surveyed said the amalgamation had succeeded in unifying Auckland's voice, and just 18 percent feel they have influence over Auckland Council decisions.

The consulting firm Deloitte supports the Committee for Auckland-initiated and Auckland Council supported annual State of the City reports which benchmark Auckland against similar cities globally.

Deloitte NZ Chief Executive Mike Horne says it's clear the city is falling behind.