

Submission to the Royal Commission on Auckland's Local Government

Urban Design Forum

Submissions Administrator
Royal Commission on Auckland Governance
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Auckland 1142

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Urban Design Forum (a network of urban professionals) makes the following submission concerning Auckland's governance. In so doing, the Urban Design Forum endorses the submission prepared by the New Zealand Institute of Architects - Urban Issues Group.

Urban design is integral to Auckland's future and its ability to meet the challenges outlined in the Commission's Terms of Reference. More liveable and prosperous neighbourhoods and town and city centres will come about through:

- More urban professionals trained and skilled in urban design, particularly in the public sector
- The emergence of a kiwi urbanism that can reflect Auckland's unique geography, heritage and identity
- Integrated decision making, at the local and regional level, involving land use planning, transport, stormwater and social infrastructure
- A wider set tools to intervene positively in the urban marketplace
- Funding tied to achieving urban design outcomes.

Auckland needs a local government structure which provides the greatest potential for these elements to develop:

Size does matter. Experience indicates that smaller councils tend to struggle to adequately fund urban design staff and pursue design-based, integrative planning processes. If anything, the silo mentality reigns stronger in the smaller councils as they are much more operationally focused. The larger council's can sustain larger policy teams that help to shape and integrate strategy. There is also more of a career path for urban design staff in larger organisations. At a very simple level, more through put (more urban design based projects and more complex developments to review) helps to build skills amongst design professionals.

Sophistication. Urban design calls for a much more sophisticated understanding of the city and how to manage it, including public engagement processes. Resources are needed to sustain the investigations and research that supports well thought out design-based plans and interventions. It requires resources like complex GIS systems and people skilled in consultation. The ability for organizations to be constantly refining and updating their approaches – to be a learning organization – is also very important. There is a need to monitor neighbourhoods before and after interventions to build up our collective knowledge about what works in the Auckland context. These actions takes resources, and bigger tends to be better. At the same time, some competition between councils for jobs, housing and

other activities does spur them on look at how they can best design and “present” their city. Competition leads to innovation in the management of the urban environment.

Geographical ambit. The area administered by the council also matters in decision making about urban design. Rural and suburban councils on the periphery of the urban area tend to see themselves as not “urban” councils where urban design is not so relevant, yet within their boundaries are some emerging urban centres of the future. In contrast, councils who manage geographically constrained urban areas see urban design as being vital to their future as they think about redevelopment and intensification of existing built up areas. If the regional council is to fully take on a strategic, design-led approach to the management of the Auckland urban area, then it needs to be given the mandate to do so. This does not mean that the Regional Council should just be an urban council; it needs to retain its mix of rural and urban areas, as it is the protection of rural resources that drives much urban policy. This rural protection focus needs to be complimented with the ability to undertake real urban planning.

A wider set of tools. The Auckland urban area has few brownfields areas which can be redeveloped; increasingly the region will have to focus on the much more challenging task of intensifying existing suburbs and town centres. This sets the city apart from international examples. What is needed are organisations that can take on the complex process of redeveloping existing settled urban areas (urban redevelopment agencies). Such organizations may be separate from a council, or be a unit of them. Either way, a larger council is more likely to be able to sustain the organizational capacity to set up and run such organizations, or where they are separate, be able to interact with them in a meaningful way.

Funding is critical. Redevelopment involves public and private money being brought together. Councils need a strong rating base to support the capital investment required. Having larger commercial and business areas within a council area makes a big difference to funding levels (as well as to thinking about how the city should be planned). Councils also need the ability to raise debt on the basis of future income from redevelopment. Councils must also have the capacity to engage with central government and to ensure that funding of separate infrastructure projects (roading, public transport, health, education) meet multiple outcomes. This all requires more complex financial management systems and more skilled staff.

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