

Submission on the Auckland Unleashed Discussion Document

Urban Design Forum

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Dear Sir/Madam

The Urban Design Forum (a network of urban professionals) makes the following submission concerning Auckland's future growth and development.

High standards of urban design have been recognized as integral to Auckland's future and its ability to meet the challenges outlined in the discussion document (and more fully in the Royal Commission Report on Auckland's governance).

More liveable and prosperous neighbourhoods and town and city centres will come about through:

- 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 of tools to intervene positively in the urban marketplace
- Funding tied to achieving urban design outcomes.

Above all, urban design promotes the principle of "working with the grain" of the city. Key attributes of Auckland are its outstanding natural environment and many neighbourhoods. The spatial plan must build on and enhance these fundamental characteristics, setting out a way for the two elements to work harmoniously together.

Auckland's Environment

The discussion document is light on the role of landscapes, green and blue networks and areas of environmental degradation in helping to shape urban form, both in terms of constraints, but also opportunities.

Urban form options

There is little analysis of different urban form options and their advantages and disadvantages. There has been a lost opportunity to advance different concepts, whether these are variations on compact city, a linear city or satellite type cities. We also fail to recognise how rules buried in our District Plan (like the minimum carparking requirement for apartments in town centres) make it commercially impossible to achieve the sort of ideal walkable centre that the Auckland Plan aspires to.

The lack of discussion of alternative urban forms makes it hard to understand the relative costs and benefits. The final strategy will inevitably be a mixed strategy involving a number of trade-offs, but we do need to clearly state what we are aiming to achieve within the urban structure. We should be aiming to maximise people's lifestyle choices by making clear distinctions between the outcome in centres and suburbs, or between centres and industrial/business zones. We need to avoid the muddled ad hoc intensification currently going on across the city, e.g:

- townhouses with little sustainability benefit degrading the environment of suburban backyards
- Medium density terraces next to rail stations, but turning their backs to them and using the whole ground level for carparking
- retail and office parks in industrial zones, reducing the supply of business land and diminishing the activity and attractiveness of nearby centres

Nature of change

Within the city limits, there is no discussion about the extent of change that may be required if the city needs to re-concentrate because of a range of wider pressures and trends (carbon taxes, road pricing, rising costs of travel, changing housing preferences and lifestyles). Will whole suburbs need to be rebuilt? As an alternative to this is whether some brownfields redevelopment is worthwhile advancing. There are various areas of industrial land beside waterways that could be recycled into new residential neighbourhoods. New business areas would need to be found for the displaced activities, such as beside the motorway on the edge of the city, in inland areas less suitable for housing.

At the other end of the spectrum, the pull to the south is likely to grow, given the increasing transport links to Hamilton / Tauranga. Yet the best living conditions lie to the north and east, along the edges of the Hauraki Gulf. How do you make that pattern work?

Strengthening neighbourhoods

There is no discussion of the importance of neighbourhoods to people's liveability and enabling a range of housing choices and types within all neighbourhoods (not just within and beside town centres). Neighbourhoods are one of the basic "building blocks of the city", more so in Auckland than other cities because of its dispersed form. The spatial plan needs

to set out how Auckland's pattern of neighbourhoods can be strengthened and extended. The importance of high quality amenity in shaping people's preference for more compact living options is not well expressed. People are happy to live in more compact housing options beside the beach, in the city centre or with extensive views, but there is also a proven market for apartments in any well-designed town centre precinct with a sense of place and interesting activity. Many Aucklanders also have a strong loyalty to their "hood" and value the opportunity to retire into their local town centre, or to have their children stay locally in affordable apartments when they become students, or young couples.

Local responses

While there is a need for a strategic direction, there needs to be flexibility as to how this direction gets played out at the local level, so that local conditions and context can be taken into account. This is from the point of view of not stopping change, but shaping it to fit local circumstances. Do we need 20 different ways to fit more people and houses into existing communities, not one? Local Board plans will be very important in helping to deliver the vision "on-the-ground". The link between the big spatial plan and these plans is not clear.

Implementation

The implementation chapter is very short, yet the strategy will stand or fall on the basis of implementation.

There has to be a convincing story of change as to how the city will adapt and modify itself in the future to a range of pressures and trends, and the role of the council in shaping this process. The public purse is not very big. Where is it going to be best to invest public resources?

A design-led district plan for the region is a major challenge, but vital to any implementation of more place/context specific design responses. This will require turning planning on its head: policies/outcomes need to lead, with rules taking a back seat; discretionary, judgement-based development assessment processes are needed to apply these policies.

At the same time there is a need to make the rules clear and more enabling. Many of our households (or at least some of their occupants) don't use cars. If we are trying to encourage more walking and public transport use, why do we still insist that every apartment in a town centre must provide a minimum number of carparks ?

Conclusion

The Urban Design Forum supports the process Council has initiated in working toward the Auckland Plan, and is pleased to be part of the continuing discussion.

The Urban Design Forum supports the process Council has initiated in working toward the Auckland Plan, applauds the intention to rely on high standards of urban design in shaping Auckland's future, and is pleased to be part of the continuing discussion.

We look forward to working with Council toward a better Auckland.