

# Friends of the Mahurangi submission to the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance

## INTRODUCTION

Friends of the Mahurangi embraces this opportunity to discuss the needs of the Mahurangi in the context of this examination of regional governance needs.

It is a time to share information and to learn, and then to build the best conceivable models for the governance of the Auckland region. Only then, after what should be an open-minded exploration, will it be time for the people to decide which of the models constructed is best for their region.

Friends of the Mahurangi does not seek to have the commission address uniquely Mahurangi issues.

Local issues are referred to only to illustrate some of the governance needs of a small community within the region—where the metropolis has a strong influence, for example, pressure for residential development for dormitory and vacation purposes.

As the first natural harbour north of Auckland, on the east coast, the Mahurangi shares close contemporary and historic links with the metropolis.

The Mahurangi Regatta is an annual reminder of those links, bringing together people with a love for the harbour and a desire for it to remain a refuge from Auckland's built, urban environment.

Residents, and enthusiasts for the Mahurangi from further afield, share a vision of the harbourscape retaining its outstanding natural beauty, and for its waters to be clear.

Mahurangi's proximity to Auckland is both the greatest threat to, and best prospect of salvation for, the harbour's un-built landscape.

## SUBMISSION IN BRIEF

### Mahurangi issues

- Mahurangi Regional Park is a significant presence in the Mahurangi catchment.
- Credit for identification of the harbour's elevated sediment accumulation rate, and the substantial funding of the response to it, is entirely due to regional governance.
- Aspirations for a holistic, community-led long-term plan to reduce sediment generation could conceivably be aided if the catchment had some form of community council.
- In addition to the local community, the Mahurangi has a regional audience that has an ongoing need for representation.

### General issues

- Improvements to Auckland region's governance will almost certainly also benefit the Mahurangi.
- The period of the inquiry provides an unprecedented opportunity for residents of the region to become better informed on local governance issues and options. The commission is well placed to assist with resources.
- Post the inquiry, the objective of securing the broadest possible support for any change, and the cause of democracy generally, is best served if the people of the Auckland region determine, by poll, the model to be adopted.

## SUBMISSION DETAIL

### **Mahurangi Regional Park is a significant presence in the Mahurangi catchment.**

The regional parks network, through the creation of the Mahurangi Regional Park, has profoundly influenced the character of the Mahurangi Harbour. Without this regional influence, it is very likely that the pattern of close coastal subdivision commenced at Jamieson Bay and Ōpahi would have continued unchecked.

The region parks are well appreciated by Rodney District residents, about a third of all usage, although there is some disquiet about park properties not contributing to rating revenue, and thus not to local road maintenance.

Mahurangi Regional Park users, whether locals or resident elsewhere in the region, need representation on the body that owns the park. Representation would be complicated if ownership of the park was transferred to a local council.

Aside from obvious fact that the Mahurangi Regional Park, or anything similar, would not exist had Auckland not acquired a regional council, it is unlikely the local council could now afford to own and operate the park, was the regional council reduced to an environmental protection agency.

### **Credit for identification of the harbour's elevated sediment accumulation rate, and the substantial funding of the response to it, is entirely due to regional governance.**

The 10-year sampling programme that alerted scientists to the elevated sediment accumulation rate was part of a regional study that just happened to include the Mahurangi Harbour.

The regional council has mounted a substantial response, the five-year Mahurangi Action Plan, to kick-start riparian protection work.

Reducing sediment generation is a long-term task entailing a range of responses including through the district plan. Funding, by necessity, is predominantly coming from outside Rodney District. This is appropriate, given the harbour has a significant regional audience.

**Aspirations for a holistic, community-led long-term plan to reduce sediment generation could conceivably be aided if the catchment had some form of community council.**

Regardless of what arrangements may evolve for the region's governance at the city–district level, the Mahurangi catchment community has a need for a local community council.

In the latter part of the five-year action plan period, the means by which the community might develop ownership of the response to the sediment action has become the focus of the regional council.

Prior to 1989, Warkworth had its own town council, and prior to 1977 was home to Rodney County Council. While those entities belong to a different era, the needs of the catchment, and the intrinsic need for communities to have their own decision-making forums, suggests that this is a core local governance component.

**In addition to the local community, the Mahurangi has a regional audience that has an ongoing need for representation.**

First time visitors to the Mahurangi Harbour invariably react with: 'This must be Auckland's best kept secret!'

But in fact for many residents of the metropolis, Mahurangi has long been their favourite place; their bolt-hole. Half of the members of Friends of the Mahurangi reside outside the catchment.

This adoring regional audience is an important source of support for protecting the landscape values and in the fight against sedimentation. At present, they enjoy some political representation, through the regional council. They can, for example, participate in the preparations of park management plans.

**Improvements to Auckland region's governance will almost certainly also benefit the Mahurangi.**

For example, action to reduce the region's contribution to climate change, and to adapt to the consequences of climate change, will be enhanced if the region becomes more cohesive and better at strategic decision-making.

Less directly, but no less important, is the truism that what is good for Auckland is good for Aotearoa.

**The period of the inquiry provides an unprecedented opportunity for residents of the region to become better informed on local governance issues and options. The commission is well placed to assist with resources.**

AUT and the University of New England and, no doubt many other universities, have published studies on Australasian local governance issues. The commission could greatly assist submitters and others following the progress of the inquiry by providing links to relevant documents and by hosting speakers with local governance insight.

**Post the inquiry, the objective of securing the broadest possible support for any change, and the cause of democracy generally, is best served if the people of the Auckland region determine, by poll, the model to be adopted.**

Local government reforms imposed by central government have proved problematic. Regardless of the merits of the governance arrangements recommended by the commission, the benefits of any changes can only be maximised if the proposed changes are legitimised by a poll of the people affected.

If the recommended changes involve a significant degree of devolution of power from central government to the region, a national poll on that aspect may be needed.

## **BACKGROUND OF SUBMITTER**

Friends of the Mahurangi formed in December 1974 and revived the Mahurangi Regatta two summers later.

Founding chairman John Male's vision was for the council and community to develop a fifty-year plan for the Mahurangi, particularly to spare the harbour from close coastal subdivision.

(John Male was a United Nations official prior to returning to Aotearoa, to take possession of a harbourside property located for him by A R D Fairburn. He was also the founding chairman of The Peace Foundation.)

Friends of the Mahurangi was unsuccessful in interesting the local council in developing such a plan, but the earlier acquisition of the key Mahurangi Heads properties as regional parks, at a time when much of the land now within the Mahurangi and Wenderholm regional parks was being prepared for subdivision, was pivotal in preserving the harbour's unbuilt appearance.

Burgeoning servicing costs convinced the local council to limit the proliferation of coastal subdivisions and rescinded the large development zone centred on the property held by shipping magnate A J Chandris at Mahurangi West.

In 2001, Friends of the Mahurangi published *Jade River: a History of the Mahurangi*. Ron Locker's history details the strong links that the harbour has always had with Auckland, for example the steamboat service to Mahurangi Heads and to Warkworth.

Ron Locker's vision for the Mahurangi had been as a national park, but was entirely grateful when a more modest goal was achieved, through the creation of the Mahurangi Regional Park.