

17 June 2020

An Open Letter in response to Auckland Council's emergency budget

For the attention of:
Phil Goff
Mayor of Auckland

Dear Phil,

The Sustainable Business Network applauds the council's transparency and clarity on the challenges it faces in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We recognise the unprecedented loss in its current income and the tough decisions the authority needs to make. But we are alarmed at some of the current budget proposals.

SBN is in its 18th year of operation. Through its membership it represents the sustainability aspirations of more than 450 organisations, and many more individuals, within the Auckland region.

Our key point is that we believe this is no time to push sustainability down the agenda. This pandemic has underlined the essential challenges for all regions in New Zealand. It is imperative the whole country continues to invest in a just transition to more sustainable and resilient ways of working. This crisis should prompt us to renew and redouble our efforts, not hold them back.

A key lesson from this global crisis should be that we cannot continue with unsustainable and unresilient ways of living and working. If we do, the next crisis will again disrupt our lives, this time in ways we can't manage by staying at home and closing our borders. At the same time the lockdown, here and elsewhere, has demonstrated the many benefits of low carbon cities. Now is a very real opportunity for us to lock in those benefits.

SBN supports a 3.5% rate rise. We believe this is needed to support those in need with the necessary facilities and improvements. However we are deeply concerned that even with this rate rise the following has been proposed:

1. Reductions in vital public and active transport improvements

Including:

- pausing or cancelling safety improvements at high risk intersection and pedestrian crossings

- pausing or deferring work on all walking and cycling projects not in construction and/or delayed planning work for future walking and cycling projects
- pausing investment in electric buses and charging infrastructure
- deferring multi-modal projects
- charging for some park and ride facilities

Auckland Plan 2050 states that “Aucklanders will be able to get where they want to go more easily, safely and sustainably.” There has been a great deal of laudable progress on this in recent years. We recognise that the Emergency Budget still includes \$52 million for the important Urban Cycling Programme, although it is proposed to cut this from \$68m. But Auckland’s options for pedestrians and cyclists still lag behind other major cities around the world. Investment in this has also lagged behind other cities in New Zealand.

We also acknowledge the proposed \$53m continued investment in new electric train rolling stock, and the maintenance of the \$56 million for much needed new public transport links between the airport and Botany.

However, it is still the case that the proposed emergency cuts are likely to force many Aucklanders back into cars and on to the city’s already heavily congested streets. The TomTom Traffic Index found congestion in Auckland increased travel times by 29% in 2018.[i] Auckland should have the best air quality in the world for its size. But city air is often severely polluted. This creates an estimated cost to taxpayers of \$466 million a year in healthcare.

A report by Auckland Transport found diesel vehicles are responsible for an estimated 81% of all vehicle-related air pollution health costs[ii]. So it's all the more surprising that the council seeks to slow its transition from diesel to electric buses.[iii]

During the lockdown many discovered the joys of active modes of transport, particularly cycling. The number of people cycling regularly around Auckland has been increasing year on year. This demonstrates the public’s appetite for investment in this area.[iv]

As well as leaving risks to cyclists and pedestrians unaddressed these cuts will undermine this growing commitment.

New Zealand’s 2017 Environmental Performance Review from the OECD report states: “Transport is the second largest emitting sector. People and freight travel mostly by road; the car ownership rate is the highest in the OECD. Further, the fleet is relatively old and inefficient.”

Vivid Economics produced a recent parliamentary report stating how New Zealand’s emissions per capita and per unit of GDP remain high by international standards. This is due to unusually high emissions from agriculture and high transport emissions intensities. As New Zealand’s largest city and transport hub, Auckland has a key role to play.

SBN has worked on these issues throughout its existence. Most recently we joined with Waka Kotahi (The New Zealand Transport Agency) to create an online Workplace Cycling Guide. Our vision is for New Zealand to have an efficient and zero carbon transport system that enhances our health and wellbeing. We believe we share this aspiration with Auckland Council, but the current proposals could set back important progress.

In contrast, the government has announced 11 new projects, including cycling and walking over the harbour bridge and extension of the electrification of the rail network. Now is the time to connect these critical infrastructure spends with continuous safe cycleways.

2. Cuts to the preservation and restoration of Auckland's ecological health

Auckland Council's funding for SBN's work in helping increase investment into community water restoration projects has just been suspended. This work raises additional funds for trees. It connects Aucklanders with nature restoration efforts. Both are vital for a healthy community and waterway. Along with this, the Council is proposing:

- reductions in pest eradication, including delaying the rat eradication component of Te Koro Waiheke project and pest eradication on Kawau Island
- reduction in Kauri Dieback research
- reduction in the Natural Environment Heritage Grant for community-led conservation and low carbon living projects, and the programme to support rural landowners to restore high ecological value sites
- reduction in staff and staff costs and internal efficiencies in the Environmental Services, Waste Services and Regulatory Services departments
- Water Protection Fund grants, which help rural landowners with riparian planting and fencing, will stop for one year.

The way we live and work is currently driving the sixth mass extinction of all life on Earth. Right now Auckland is killing the Hauraki Gulf.

The latest State of the Gulf report detailed fisheries on the verge of collapse. Sediment-choked and polluted waterways. Decades of destructive fishing methods have depleted fishing biomass today to less than half the level in 1925. They've wrecked the seabed, leaving vast sections as underwater wastelands. Trevally numbers have plummeted by 86% from historic levels. Snapper are down by 83%, sharks by 86% and dolphins 97%.

Forest clearance, development and farming has driven sediment down our waterways and storm drains. This is muddying the once-crystal clear waters. It's left the previously sandy beaches layered in sludge. Shellfish-laden reefs are choked in silt. Dredging has stripped the seafloor of its mussel beds. It has reduced scallops to alarmingly low levels. Crayfish/kōura are now regarded as "functionally extinct".

Little improvement has been made since the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park was established 20 years ago. Population growth, coastal developments and climate change all foretell a dire future if radical changes aren't made. We can't afford to slow down our efforts. We must accelerate them.

Nature is not just an extra or a nice to have. It is not just a picturesque thing to look at out of our office windows or a place to go for a walk with a sandwich at lunchtime. Nature is life. It is our survival. It is what all our lives rely on. Many experts have pointed out that the Covid-19 outbreak came as a direct result of humans disrupting natural processes. How ironic and tragic then, that Auckland's proposed response is to cut already inadequate efforts to reduce that disruption. While public awareness is high we should be stimulating community to act, volunteer and collectivise around restoring nature around Auckland.

In contrast the government has announced a \$1.1 billion investment to create 11,000 environment jobs in our regions. It seems unlikely that is intended to help facilitate cuts in existing work. This would undercut the additional value of this investment.

SBN has supported 19 community projects to restore waterways across the Auckland region in the last five years. Auckland Council has been highly supportive of these efforts, providing seed

funding and expertise. But even so, the protection and repair of our vital natural systems has for far too long been left largely in the hands of volunteers.

During the lockdown there was a great deal of discussion about what activities and resources were 'essential'. If our land, water, fellow species and the life of the only planet we can live on are not essential to us, then it is difficult to understand what is.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to build on our world-renowned success in managing Covid-19 with another world-beating effort to tackle the pernicious problems that remain? We could spend the coming years rebuilding the great abundance of New Zealand's natural riches, and show the world why Aotearoa is such a special place to visit.

We would urge all those reading this to consider their own responses to these issues, and submit their thoughts to SBN and direct to the Council [consultation](#) on this budget.

Ngā mihi

Rachel Brown ONZM
Founder and CEO
The Sustainable Business Network

[i] https://www.tomtom.com/en_gb/traffic-index/auckland-traffic

[ii] <https://at.govt.nz/media/1980070/low-emissions-bus-roadmap-dec-2018.pdf>

[iii] <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/03/14/486488/city-air-pollution-still-too-high>

[iv] <https://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/plans-projects-policies-reports-bylaws/our-plans-strategies/budget-plans/our-10-year-budget/docs10yearbudgetvolumes/10-year-budget-2018-2028-volume-2.pdf>