

Sprawling Auckland's transport woes

Plans for a new Manukau town have sparked local debate. CARMEN GRAY, SCOTT WINTON and NATALIA GARCIA investigate.

As far as cities go, Auckland is hardly what you would call short of space. Although it has only just over a seventh of the population of London, it spreads out over a much larger area.

Even in the heart of the city, all the large properties and greenery can make it seem to foreign visitors that this traditionally rural nation has not quite become used to the notion of minimally sufficient urban living space.

And now New Zealand's largest planned town development, Flat Bush, is set to push the city limit even further. Located in Manukau to the south of the new Botany development, Flat Bush is expected to be home to at least 40,000 residents by 2020.

With the lack of a cohesive transport network already the bane of Auckland's sprawled out populace, this new development could cause more problems than it solves.

Flat Bush is just one of the developments in place to deal with Auckland region's huge population growth, which is expected to grow from 1.2 million to two million by 2050.

Covering 1700ha, the new town is planned to include 14,000 houses, a commercial town centre, and a large green space, the Sir Barry Curtis Park. Construction of the four-lane Ormiston Rd Bridge, which will run over the top of the park, is designed to create easier access to the town centre.

While perching a new town this size on the edge of the city rather than filling in the gaps in Auckland's sprawling landscape might seem crazy to some, Flat Bush's "planned community" approach does have its advocates.

Elizabeth Aitken Rose, deputy head of the school of architecture and planning at University of Auckland, calls the plan for Flat Bush "exciting".

"I think it's a genuine attempt to think about how we can manage Auckland's growth in a more thoughtful way. The idea is to create a more sustainable and self-contained environment, and not let subdivision endlessly sprawl out."

Manukau City Council predicts that only 10 per cent of the Flat Bush population will work in the centre of Auckland. Senior lecturer in planning Dr Bruce Hucker says such a community will reduce reliance on transport links.

"There'll be a range of services within the town centre, with the idea that more people will be able to go to work within it. The underlying theory is that it will reduce the need to travel to work by car," says Hucker.

But to many, an Auckland of the future made up of a cluster of separate island towns is not a vision of a modern urban city with heart, if similar existing developments such as Botany Downs, near Flat Bush, are anything to go by.

"They've just plonked a community in the farmland. Botany looks like Legoland. It's awful," says Manukau City resident Leisha Jones.

If Flat Bush residents do follow a lifestyle



PICTURE: MANUKAU CITY COUNCIL

FLATBUSH: It is feared the planned development will add extra pressure to Auckland's already congested roads.

which requires them to travel around Auckland for work and leisure, the "planned community" approach will do little to quarantine them from the roads.

Measures need to be put in place to ease the added pressure on road networks from the Flat Bush development, says Auckland regional councillor Joel Cayford.

"It's changing slowly, but at the moment Manukau City is a public transport desert," he says. "It will remain gridlocked if it remains the same."

Even if Flat Bush residents do for the most part work near their homes in Mangere, Manukau, and Botany, improvements to the bus system will need to be made in order to avoid traffic problems, he says.

"Buses will have to be either quicker or cheaper or, understandably, people won't use them."

Green Party MP and spokesperson for transport Keith Locke also sees improvements to the transport network as essential.

"We want to move to a society where cars aren't used. Public transport should be cheap and affordable," he says. "You don't want a city where whole groups of people can't get around like the under-aged, elderly, disabled, and those who can't afford it."

The Auckland Regional Transport Authority, which is funded by the Auckland Regional Council (ARC), released the regional passenger transport plan in April for improvements to the city's transport network.

It includes plans for a new train link which will connect Manukau to the main rail line which runs from Auckland to Papakura.

"Manukau will be one of the largest boarding-stations in Auckland," says Steve Wrenn, policy analyst for the Manukau City Council transport committee. There will also be a bus to Manukau from Flat Bush and a bus from Flat Bush to Botany, with the roads incorporating bus priority lanes, he says.

Locke believes the planned extension to the train line is not sufficient to ease the traffic problems Flat Bush will face. He wants a rail link to be put in place which would go past Manukau, through Botany, and link back to the city via Panmure.

It is not clear even when the more mini-

mal improvements to the transport system proposed by the authority will be implemented. Hucker says there is simply not enough money available at present.

Wrenn suggests the ARC is being tightfisted by placing serious funding constraints on the authority.

"Look overseas at Perth and Brisbane. They're actually spending. Look at Vancouver and Ottawa, which are similar to Auckland with topography constraints like us. They achieve a lot more, but they spend a lot more."

"Governance issues in Auckland haven't been helpful," he says. "There is an unwillingness from the ARC to up the rates to pay for rail."

**"The financial costs of unbridled urban sprawl are huge."
- Len Brown**

Mike Lee, ARC chairman, says he wants the rates increase to be a gradual one which occurs predictably year by year, so people aren't surprised by a big hike.

According to University of Auckland's Aitken Rose, this problem is nothing new for Auckland. Residential development has always historically preceded the development of infrastructures such as transport networks to cope with the growth, which puts a great strain on the city.

"The problem we have in Auckland is that the horse always follows the cart," she says.

It's essential that public transport is planned in advance for Flat Bush, says Cayford.

"Manukau at the moment is built just for cars," he says. "And if you don't put bus-lanes in initially it's very hard to do it afterwards. Politicians won't back it because it's very unpopular with motorists."

Then, even if they do finally get established people won't use buses because they're already habitually using their cars, he says.

Flat Bush is planned to have a medium density of housing, which Hucker says will provide enough rates to eventually fund a strong transport network.

"If you have a sufficient density of population you provide an economic base for a successful public transport system. It's a sensible strategy to use," he says.

The main opposition to the plan was from developers who wanted larger sections, while the council wanted higher density due to traffic issues. But Botany Community Board member Roy Bootle is not so sure of the finer motives behind this level of density.

"The roads are designed small so they can sell more houses and they have to spend less on road upkeep," he says. "It won't be good if

it's anything like Botany, where the roads are just too small. Buses can't fit on the road."

Former city councillor and 2004 mayoral candidate Len Brown believes the younger generation of New Zealanders are tending more towards higher-density housing as a lifestyle option, rather than striving for the "Kiwi quarter-acre pavlova paradise" as an ideal.

"The next generation aren't over-enamoured with spending their weekends mowing lawns," he told the *Howick and Pakuranga Times* recently.

But it seems this trend is yet to fully come of age.

"High density housing is not in keeping with the traditional New Zealand way of life," says Manukau city councillor Dick Quax.

Just how much space traditional Kiwis believe is needed for a decent home is demonstrated by the wild comparison he draws between Flat Bush's medium density and the ultimate cityscape of high-rise clutter.

"They're on small sections, and some of the density will be on the scale of Hong Kong," he says. "My feeling is there won't be enough separate family dwellings and they'll be hard to sell."

While the persistence of such views does little to rein in the city's sprawl, Hucker says there is a definite limit on development. The Auckland regional growth strategy, developed in 1999, has placed an invisible cordon around the Auckland region to prevent it spreading out beyond a certain limit.

It determines that 70 per cent of new growth in the region up to 2050 must be within these boundaries.

Flat Bush will fall within the current urban zoning.

Brown believes the implementation of such a limit is essential. "The financial costs of unbridled urban sprawl are huge," he said. "We will not be able to sustain a proper public transportation system if we constantly expand our urban boundaries."

Quax terms this a "land strangulation policy", and sees no reason the city should not extend endlessly.

And it seems the regional growth strategy may not in fact put such views to rest, as the ARC is showing that invisible boundaries are prone to be moved.

Manukau City Council has just endorsed a proposed review of the strategy by the ARC, which wants to move the metropolitan urban limit out further.

Until more dollars and planning are put in to change the disconnected nature of the Auckland region and provide enough incentive to keep cars off the roads, we may have no choice but to agree with Hucker's resigned vision of getting around the city.

"Congestion will always be a fact of life," he says.



PHOTO: SCOTT WINTON

MANUKAU: Residents call crowded subdivisions "legoland."