

# Supercity derailed by the very infighting it planned to prevent

**A surprise proposal by Auckland's mayors to make the first move towards a regional supercity has gone down the tubes. JOSEPH BARRATT, ANDRE HUEBER AND ROSS McNAUGHTON review the failure.**



AUCKLAND SKYLINE: The heart of the potential supercity.

PHOTO: JOANNA DAVIES

In an ironic twist, mayor Dick Hubbard's plan to give Auckland a collective voice has been scuttled by the kind of infighting and regional divisions his proposal sought to eliminate.

The plan was intended to create a body with increased powers over the Auckland region in order to achieve efficiency and minimise bureaucracy.

One of the things hoped for by supporters of the plan from the region's mayors is an end to the divisions within Auckland and a cohesive voice for the region.

The Rugby World Cup stadium debacle was seen by many as a prime example of the failings within the Auckland council structure.

Speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* in the aftermath of the stadium fiasco, Hubbard said: "If there was strong regional governance, we wouldn't be making the decision on the stadium one year after the Rugby World Cup was announced."

Last September Auckland's four metropolitan mayors, led by Hubbard, announced a proposal to split the region into three cities presided over by a Lord Mayor.

Hubbard said: "We've heard Aucklanders' message loud and clear. It's time for action and urgency. We'll speed up transportation, get the waterfront we aspire to, and Aucklanders' rates will work harder and go further," says Hubbard.

"It'll be one plan, one voice, a single vision. We're a collection of cities struggling to co-ordinate our activities. The lack of cohesive strategy inhibits progress."

"Our proposal for a greater Auckland council is a fresh start and will accelerate our rise to true international status."

Hubbard is not alone in his desire to see Auckland as a world-class city, able to compete with the likes of Sydney and Singapore.

Manukau mayor Sir Barry Curtis said: "There's an urgent need for coherence and a governance structure if we're to be a world-class city. A new metro region needs to incorporate contemporary goals and leadership to include social, economic, environmental and cultural outcomes."

There is a perception that Auckland's lack of a consistent direction, and a collective voice, damages the city's credibility within central government. Michael Bassett, who was responsible for the 1989 changes to Auckland councils, sees this as a factor. Writing in the *Herald* he described "how weak our collective voices can sound when you are in Wellington".

The reforms to Auckland local government are also supported by business groups. Bruce Goldsworthy, manager of advocacy and manufacturing for the Employers and Manufacturers Association, has called for a new council structure, but is frustrated that central government has left it up to the councils themselves to decide upon the details.

"The region's seven mayors can't agree what changes should occur, when, or what the governance structure should be like."

The plan came on the back of statements by Deputy Prime Minister Michael Cullen: "There is always the risk they may veer off in different directions when you just come to the crunch on key issues. It is hard to see how we can create a vision for a world-class city because what we have got is five non-world-class cities."

But several days after the plan was announced the idea floundered, though the Government still believed there was a need for reform in Auckland's local government structure.

In response to the original proposal put forward by the four mayors, Prime Minister Helen Clark said: "How do you drive Auckland to make the next great leap forward as a metro region — or do you just accept that we will muddle through?"

The proposal suffered from stiff resistance because of the lack of consultation with both the public and other councillors. Its possible effect on grassroots community board representation was also of concern to ratepayer associations, which led to its defeat.

The Government then asked for Auckland's eight councils to vote on a preferred model of regional governance.

*New Zealand Herald* columnist Brian Rudman was dismissive of this development. "Instead of producing a radical plan of reform, the Government has tossed Auckland's governance problems back to the lunatics and told them to reform their own asylum."

On September 15, seven days after the original plan had been publicly unveiled and rejected, Mike Lee, chairman of the Auckland Regional Council, met with the Auckland Mayoral Forum.

Lee opposed the "supercity" proposal and suggested maintaining the status quo but giving the ARC more teeth. The meeting was led by the forum's deputy chair,

Papakura mayor John Robertson.

"[The four mayors' plan] was never part of a mayoral forum so it wasn't endorsed. It wasn't put forward to the meeting as a proposal," said Robertson.

Robertson attempted to bring the mayors and the chair of the ARC together.

An Auckland Mayoral Forum meeting was held to get a resolution everyone could agree to and sign. Robertson chaired the meeting. "The keywords I picked up as chair as I went around the room was we need to strengthen regional governance. That was great. That enables us to say: 'What do we strengthen and how do we do this?'"

**"There's an urgent need for coherence and a governance structure if we're to be a world-class city."**

Their resolution said the councils would put together a new, inclusive plan by Christmas. It was passed unanimously.

What will all this bring? Michael Lee says: "Regional governance needs to be strengthened, and probably needs to be done in two ways. Some extra responsibilities for the ARC [and] more co-operation in such key areas as rates gathering and building consents and other efficiencies in administration, such as the removal of duplications."

Local Government Minister Mark Burton met with the Auckland Mayoral Forum in early March.

"Co-ordinated strategic planning across the Auckland region is critical to ensuring that Auckland can compete as a twenty-first century city," he said in a press release on online news site *Scoop*.

"The Government supports the Auckland proposal in principle, and particularly the underlying theme that greater coordination and a unified vision are critical for the region," Burton said.

"Ministers agree with the need for a stronger regional governance structure with enhanced funding mechanisms and resources to enable it to take a stronger role in the provision of regional facilities, including potential new roles beyond the ARC's current responsibilities."

"I have written to councils to seek their agreement to undertake the further cooperative work now required."

However the "supercity" proposal hit a bump on April 15. The Green and Maori parties refused to support plans for a

major council revamp.

Auckland Green MP Keith Locke said his party, which Labour depends on to pass legislation, was opposed to a "supercity" that weakened the powers of the city and district councils.

Locke preferred a forum with over-arching powers so it could govern the growth strategy for the region, as well as transport and environment issues, without weakening "grassroots" councils.

The proposal's effect on community boards is unknown at this stage, but an over-arching greater council could see a lessening of powers for city councils leaving doubt as to the future role of community boards.

While the proposal does not include plans to immediately change the structure of community boards, there may be an impact on roles.

"Any changes to this or other aspects of political representation are yet to be determined. In a sense, it was just a revamped ARC with a different name," Locke said.

"But we didn't like the Lord Mayor concept of some all-powerful mayor or the idea of government appointees."

Maori Party co-leader Dr Pita Sharples said consultation was a huge issue for the Maori Party, and councils were not engaging Maori properly.

"There is a huge risk that Maori issues will be submerged within the supercity concept," Sharples said.

Additional concern has been raised about the intention behind the proposal. Penny Bright, head of the Water Pressure Group, has concerns about the way it has been handled.

She points to the fact that Hubbard is a rich businessman in his own right, and that suggestions for positions for unelected business representatives is undemocratic.

She claims the "restructuring of Auckland" could leave open the gates for increased privatisation.

Hubbard's intentions are clear, she said. She produced an email from Dick Hubbard to Helen Clark dated September 5.

"We are unanimous in our belief that this proposed reform has to be both bold and fast," Hubbard said.

"As you and we are aware, the business community generally and business groups specifically, have argued for rationalisation of Auckland structure for some years now."

It's now unlikely any changes will make it through Parliament in time for local body elections next year.