

Rates

We acknowledge that Regional Council rate increases have been amongst the lowest in our region, however, local government rates are increasing in excess of CPI. Ratepayers are in a cost-of-living crisis. Growth cannot be an excuse as it is simply a factor you will have to deal with.

How will you manage Rates increases?

1. Keep rates increases at or below the level of inflation
2. Go through expenditure line-by-line
3. Return \$2.5 million in surplus back to ratepayers

Comments (200 words max):

As one of the 6 current Councillors who form the Rates Control Team, we have already been fighting this battle to control rates increases in the current term of the Waikato Regional Council.

-- For example, we voted to return \$2.5 million in surplus back to ratepayers in this year's Annual Plan, which would have reduced rates by 1.7%. But unfortunately we were blocked by the Chair Pamela Storey using her casting vote to keep the \$2.5 million for "rainy day contingencies".

-- Similarly our Rates Control Team voted to leave Local Government NZ, which would have saved approx. \$100,000 and removed unnecessary bureaucratic input into our decision-making. But once again the Chair used her casting vote to put us back into LGNZ.

--These types of 7-7 losses due to the Chair's casting vote is the reason why we've formed the Rates Control Team so that voters will have a clear choice to put a fiscally-responsible team in charge of decision-making at the Regional Council for the next term.

BEN DUNBAR-SMITH

Debt

Debt has been the easy option for local government entities to resort to in order to hold rates down in the face of inflation, growth, and a need to be re-elected. Councils such as Hamilton and others have had rating downgrades pointing to a failure by Councils to prudently manage their finances.

How will you deal with debt?

1. WRC debt is currently low - but is planned to increase due to Govt imposed mandates
2. The Govt's mandate for bus electrification has major implications for debt
3. The need to upgrade an aging flood protection system has debt implications

Comments (200 words max):

Central Government mandates have major implications for Waikato Regional Council's future debt profile.

-- At present Central Government has mandated that no new diesel buses can be imported into New Zealand from December 2025, and that the nation's bus fleet must be fully electric within the next decade. This means that someone needs to pay for the provision of new bus terminals with expensive charging facilities, as well as the purchase of an entire new electric bus fleet. Regional Council staff have predicted this could cost up to \$280 million, plus transport hubs.

But there is no Government funding left to pay for this upgrade. That's why it is an unfunded mandate being dropped by Central Government onto ratepayers, and bus-users. The Rates Control Team will be doing its best to resist this unfunded mandate with lobbying and finding cost-cutting mechanisms such as "sweating the assets" of existing diesel buses. We are determined to find ways to resolve this future debt burden.

--A similar debt burden is looming if a decision is made to continue with Te Huia, as a projected \$100 million in new rolling stock will be required.

--And stopbanks and flood protection schemes that safeguard our dairy industry and rural towns on the Hauraki Plains and lower Waikato also require continual upgrades which have implications for debt.

Amalgamation

The amalgamation of some or all of Waikato Councils has been an issue the Chamber has been canvassing for some years. Auckland has been amalgamated, and the net result is seen as positive for their community with little diminution of democracy.

"For the 2025/2026 rating year, Auckland Council has announced a total rates increase of 5.8%, equating to approximately \$223 per year for the average residential property."

What is your considered position on Amalgamation?



For amalgamation



Against amalgamation

If in favour of change, how would you implement it?

1. Create three unitary councils - central, north, and south
2. Reform the regional council, splitting out its operations into catchment boards
3. Find ways to solve Treaty issues that overlay the regional council functions

Comments (200 words max):

NZ First's Shane Jones has recently been talking about reform of regional councils. This topic has been taken up by National Ministers including the Prime Minister who have also talked enthusiastically about the need to reform regional government.

-- So our Rates Control Team enters this election knowing that it may be the last for regional councils in their current form. If this happens, then we're okay with this. But we want to be part of the picture to ensure that any redesign is competent and effective.

--For the truth is that the Waikato region is one of the most complex to re-design through amalgamation. For a start, there are 10 different district councils which cover a wide variety of geographies, as well as differing population sizes.

--When it comes to the regional council, there are a complex web of Treaty settlements that need to be understood and integrated into a new model.

--In addition there are flood control catchments that would need to revert to being managed by farmer-controlled catchment boards. But this will be complex without ratepayer contributions from the towns and city who benefit more indirectly from the flood protection and export economy from the rural area.

-- So there is no simple solution. My pick would be 3 unitaries - one around Hamilton City, one in the north, and one in the South.