

JENNIFER NICKEL

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. Responsible long-term planning to avoid short-term reactive cost premiums
2. Re-evaluating funding models when outdated or no longer sensible/affordable (e.g. flood protection infrastructure funding models require review next term)
3. Consider how council can influence better cost-of-living outcomes for its constituents via the services it can provide; beyond managing its own budget and rates levels.

Comments (200 words max):

I have always encouraged and supported the Regional Council CEO to think creatively and innovatively to re-evaluate and find efficiencies and savings each year, which is how a bit of headroom is made to allow for strategic improvements while keeping rates increases consistently within some of the lowest for regional councils in the country.

Regional Council is a long-term institution that exists to serve the betterment of its local community. It should have long-term horizons and prepare well to get the lowest total cost outcomes by planning proactively for infrastructure and community resilience to foreseeable challenges. Negligent underinvestment is not acceptable as we ultimately pay more in either rates or other ways.

Times change, rules change, and beneficiaries - as well as their appetite to pay - change. Funding models need review so they are fair and affordable into the future.

Councils can influence it's citizens holistic cost-of-living experiences through the quality of their services - e.g. public transport provision helps many people, and if it were more convenient it would be a valid mobility option for many more. Council must thoughtfully increase quality of life in the Waikato, not simply focus only on its own budget and its rates.

JENNIFER NICKEL

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. Use debt strategically for appropriate capital investments only.
2. Re-evaluating funding models when outdated or no longer sensible/affordable (e.g. flood protection infrastructure funding models require review next term)
3. Stay within the finance policy limit for net external debt/total revenue.

Comments (200 words max):

Borrowing should be used in a strategic way only, not for operational expenditure. Waikato Regional Council has responsible finance policy limits that we stay within and an investment fund which is currently greater in value than the level of debt held.

Debt is an acceptable way of financing capital with long term benefits up front and spreading the cost of that over a reasonable timeframe. The majority of Regional Council's infrastructure is for flood protection purposes. Major renewals are required in the coming decades for flood protection assets hence the funding model requires review to ensure fairness and affordability. The infrastructure strategy was updated this term to take into account changing circumstances, including climate change, to prepare for this.

Regional Council's have access to the Local Government Funding Agency which offers borrowing at lower interest rates than the community has access to. There is potential to explore how this could be used in conjunction with bulk purchasing to benefit our community.

JENNIFER NICKEL

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. Encourage mayoral forum to coordinate funding for a process for Y1 annual plans
2. Encourage local authorities to prepare potential shared-service solutions
3. Encourage the coordination of a citizens assembly, observed/supported by an elected members governance committee, to prepare a 'community plan' which has recommendations for relevant councils; then advocate for its adoption as a strategic direction document by all relevant councils which have actions in this plan.

Comments (200 words max):

Local government is intended as a way for communities to shape their future independent of central government. So it will have buy-in if driven bottom-up.

I believe that there are several sub-regions within our region. Local authorities within these could work together, including with mana whenua input, to come up with potential solutions that could be proposed to a regional citizens assembly to provide short, medium and longer term recommendations for each council to adopt and fund through iterations of annual and long term plans.

I believe it is important to "transition before transforming" in amalgamation initiatives, otherwise too many good things get lost in the changes. We have long-term institutions with huge requirements for transparency, and communities that need to be able to keep up with the shifts to stay in favour of them.

We can and should approach this gradually in a strategically staged manner and evaluate benefits, as achieved, as we go. Some councils are very willing to partner with their neighbours and shift to shared-services, others will take longer to get scale. The political narrative changes as evidence of benefits mounts. The Minister for Local Government should be briefed and available to help on request.