

From wild to wonderful – the story of the west and Waitakere

By Waitakere Mayor Bob Harvey – now in his fifth term as mayor and his 15th year of commitment to the place he loves

In all modesty Auckland's 'west' or Waitakere is a New Zealand success story.

The area began life as a dormitory suburb of the country's largest city and its "address" was Struggle Street. People were marginalised, there was a high crime rate and very few facilities or infrastructure. The area had a bad rep.

But the west had heart thanks to its people, an amalgam of cultures who found the ability to live together, support each other's lifestyles and embrace their differences. And because of that 'westies' very quickly embraced the eco city concept which has, 15 years on from its adoption, quite simply completely transformed the area into Waitakere, a modern, 21st century city.

I was elected to the mayoralty in 1992 on an environmental platform and shortly afterwards my council and I had the courage to make Waitakere an eco city.

It was a bold and innovative move – we were the first in the country to do so – and it was bumpy at the start. But the platform gave us hope, pride and recognition. It was about creating a flagship brand, not tree hugging. And it was about people, inspired by Agenda 21 and its noble aims and goals.

Within a year we had started planting trees, cleaning our city water ways and involving our community in dialogue and consultation like no other council.

We slowed down streets, started to create jobs for our young, reduced crime by working with police, the courts and women's and men's groups. We replaced grunge with skateboard parks, swimming pools and walking and cycling tracks amid 400 city parks.

We were afraid of nothing because we had a strong vision and a purpose. We honoured New Zealand's founding document the Treaty of Waitangi and we created space for our Pacific people and new migrants. We gave everyone an equal chance to have a voice and vision. Our key word was sustainability.

My inspiration to make this happen and to create an eco city was from Al Gore and his book *Earth in the Balance*, a milestone in publishing and a major multi national best seller. The book explained the world's ecological predicament and described a range of policies to deal with the most pressing problems. It was about rescuing the environment and included a plan to avoid future ecological disasters. I was truly inspired and the book had a profound effect on my thinking, as has Gore's latest book *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The eco city and sustainability became our core battle cry and while it was new for the west the eco city concept is now the norm for a lot of cities around the world.

And here in Waitakere our dream has in many ways arrived. We are one of New Zealand's most respected cities. Our unemployment is now about two percent and crime is down more than 40 percent. We are respected and honoured. We have established and developed a marine industry precinct and many of the companies located in Waitakere build super yachts for the rich and famous. Many of New Zealand's most well known movies were filmed in Waitakere including Narnia – The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe and In My Father's Den.

The public buildings we have constructed over the past 10 years have all been sustainable, buildings that are foundation stones for Waitakere. They have helped us to deliver the eco city vision, lift the quality of life available to our communities and strengthened the city's identity and civic pride.

By creating a city that is sustainable, dynamic and just we are ensuring our kids have opportunities. These buildings, including our new civic and administration complex, Waitakere Central which was officially opened in September 2006, are resource efficient, they reduce the environmental impact, they are cost effective in their construction and operation, they enhance human health and productivity and they are user friendly and culturally enriching.

All that council does has been coloured by our commitment to sustainability. We look at all we do through a 'viewing lense that is the greenprint' – from our transport strategies which include a commitment to promoting public transport and bike and pedestrian lanes through to our green network which links the spectacular Waitakere Ranges into the city through an extensive planting programme.

We have set ambitious greenhouse gas reduction goals and we have many practical actions underway to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In the current year we have more than \$400,000 budgeted specifically for climate protection projects. As part of our ambitious work programme we are embarking on a public education and publicity campaign including a series of climate change related films, Waitakere's Eco Day and a still confidential but high profile renewable energy demonstration project.

Having said that, there is still a long way to go. Initiatives have a shelf life and they must be invigorated and enhanced. We still have a car dependent society and its going to take a long time to make some significant inroads in reducing the amount of traffic in and out of the city every day on the motorway. That's where we see sustainable economic and social development as being so important. The more local opportunities and employment the less need there is to look for work and fun elsewhere.

Also at present we are reviewing our District Plan to try and ensure more sustainable development takes place at the neighbourhood level and we are looking at ways we can incentivise our developers to build more sustainably and increasingly we are using more stringent design guides. I would like to see us go so far as to refuse building consent for any planned construction unless it has a solar energy source.

But that's the future. This is about our present and our transformation. And what that transformation has meant is a city and a people with a sense of place. The wild west no longer has any pockets of poverty and despair. Our surveys show an overwhelming support for the city and what it offers including the glorious beaches and the Waitakere Ranges.

Indeed Waitakere was, at the end of last year, declared the most "liveable" city in the world (population of 200,000 to 750,000). The accolade came from the United Nations backed LivCom Awards. Our win was all about smart thinking and innovative ways of dealing with the effects of population growth, crime, increasing waste volumes, stormwater, traffic etc. Smart planning and involving communities in everything we do. And it's about recognition of the fact Waitakere's new "address" is Waitakere - World Leader In Sustainability.