

Raising NZ into the 21st century



Vision without action is a daydream, action without vision is a nightmare, the proverb goes – and that neatly sums up Auckland’s and our national dilemma, writes **Michael Barnett**.

Our city has grown like topsy, but the unifying vision to realise our potential is missing in action. Instead we have a topsy turvy welter of costly, unco-ordinated action as our city plays catch up to build the trunk infrastructure essential to any civilised society – housing, roading, transport, employment, amenities – and yes, stormwater systems.

Auckland’s shamefully inadequate stormwater system that increasingly spills raw sewage to pollute our beautiful harbours, beaches and streams when it rains heavily (in a city unkindly dubbed the city of snails) exemplifies a poverty of infrastructure investment from decades of not-on-my-watch, do nothing or as little as possible, expediency.

Now it’s “catch as catch can”. The billion-dollar plus central interceptor sewage and stormwater pipe is under construction, all 13km of it, but not in time for the new housing developments sprouting around the far reaches of the city limits. It’s called development and ready or not, it’s an unstoppable march.

We cannot continue to pursue disjointed action without a vision or

cohesive plan. We need to grow up and look beyond the next election, or the next 500 houses or owning property at any cost whether Auckland is your home or not.

Auckland cannot go it alone. A 21st century city needs 21st century infrastructure and that means we must be visionary, aspirational and inspirational in our thinking and collaborative in our relationships to find the ways and means to have those basics to support a truly liveable city.

Continuing to play catch up on funding billions of dollars to replace and build critical infrastructure is not sustainable. Auckland’s balance sheet is stressed. Borrowing is at capacity. Debt levels could destroy our brightest hopes if we don’t think fresh, take

the lead and build a new model to enable us to deliver our growth op-

portunities – social, cultural, economic – to attract the skilled people Auckland needs to thrive and live in safe, healthy, inclusive and resilient communities. So, what’s the plan?

First up, we need a Government that leads the way. That implies having a galvanising shared vision to work together and act with pace in the best interests of all New Zealand.

Central Government holds the purse strings. It must step up and fund big projects that are national assets of importance and benefit everyone, not just Aucklanders. Or we’ll all be denied access to the wealth of opportunity lapping on our shores and relegate us to the sluggish backwaters of terminal catch-up.

Local government too must take a leap forward and make the case for central funding of specific projects

identified as national assets while getting on with Auckland projects that it must plan, design and deliver in time and on budget to support population growth.

We can do things today to break the catch-as-catch-can cycle and take the lead, including accelerating decision-making and speed to action without being waylaid by sideshows.

Ports of Auckland is a major earner. It may move one day, in 20 or 25 years’ time, if that is the vision, but its transformation will continue as a leader in innovation and automation. Meanwhile, there are inspirational actions that can be taken to remove the waterfront car-yard eyesore and make better use of this prime real estate – with open spaces or shared cycle and walkways for instance.

Immigration is critical to feeding long term growth, not just house prices, but we’ve got to get smarter in identifying the skills we want to attract and retain to build a robust,

internationally competitive, creative economy. We’ve got to get into schools early to build a workforce that is ready and open to practical, on-the-job, lifelong learning to be fit for this era of technology disruption.

We also need to think about international partnerships, investment models and alternative income streams to pay our way without necessarily hiking rates excessively or selling outright our natural and national infrastructure assets to offshore buyers.

But we cannot retreat into our silos. The lesson from the rear view mirror is that we didn’t look ahead because we feared having to spend big bucks today, so when tomorrow arrived we were caught short. That catch-up model is broken. We must fight to build the new, have a vision we all support, and an urgency and commitment to act on it.

● *Michael Barnett is Chief Executive of the Auckland Regional Chamber of Commerce*