

Comment on Productivity Commission's draft report "Using Land for Housing" (June 2015)

Paul Luckman, 29 July 2015.

The issue is real and urgent, but the solution will take time and a strategic approach is necessary.

As the our economy cools down, which it seems to be doing now, the rate of immigration may also slow down and perhaps reduce some of the pressures on housing.

A city's success depends on many factors besides its size. The recent PWC Cities of Opportunities report lists education, technology, global access, infrastructure, sustainability, livability, health, economic clout, costs, and ease of business. These factors are influenced to varying degrees by population size.

Unhelpfully high growth rates strain planning and development processes, and infrastructure, with the result that a city may not realise the benefits it is pursuing.

Auckland needs to ensure that it captures the benefits of larger size, and not simply become a large consumer hub and home for houses.

Auckland depends more than other cities on its environmental assets for its competitiveness. Preserving these assets requires healthy democratic processes. The environment is experienced by people at a very fine grained, intimate level. The arguments about local environmental sustainability are won through the energies and passion of people with local knowledge. An unnecessarily narrow approach to increasing the housing stock runs the risk of killing the goose that lays the golden egg.

Planners and developers both see consultation as a burden. Planners are always having to cut process costs, and developers just want to get on with it. We should see consultation processes as something to be proud of, not something to be pared down to next to nothing. That is not to say that the processes cannot be improved, which they of course can.

Auckland's problems to a large extent stem from failure to get the big picture right. The "mayor's vision" carries almost no political weight. Sustainability is not understood, and the approach to climate change is ambivalent and churlish.

Cities are having to lead the charge on climate change, and development processes and urban design are major levers a city can pull to achieve outcomes for climate change in particular.

So long as Auckland cannot coalesce round a position on the big issues it will always experience difficulties with the "smaller" ones that the Productivity Commission has listed. Without agreement on the big issues, consultation processes are protracted and ineffectual and, as we have seen with the building regulations, the results are liable to be re-litigated.

In the absence of an agreed and credible vision (as opposed to one which rides on nothing other than economies of scale), Auckland needs a practically useful and agreed definition of sustainable development to guide decision processes. Suitable definitions exist that can be woven into local government and resource management legislation and expedite decision-making.

With an agreed operational definition for sustainable development, The New Zealand science system can be much more useful in modelling and evaluating coupled regional development pathways, shedding light on big picture solutions, and injecting some objectivity and authority into development debates.

Auckland's problems cannot and should not be solved in isolation. Auckland must not be a dead weight or risk to the national economy, and neither should its "success" come at the expense of the rest of the country.