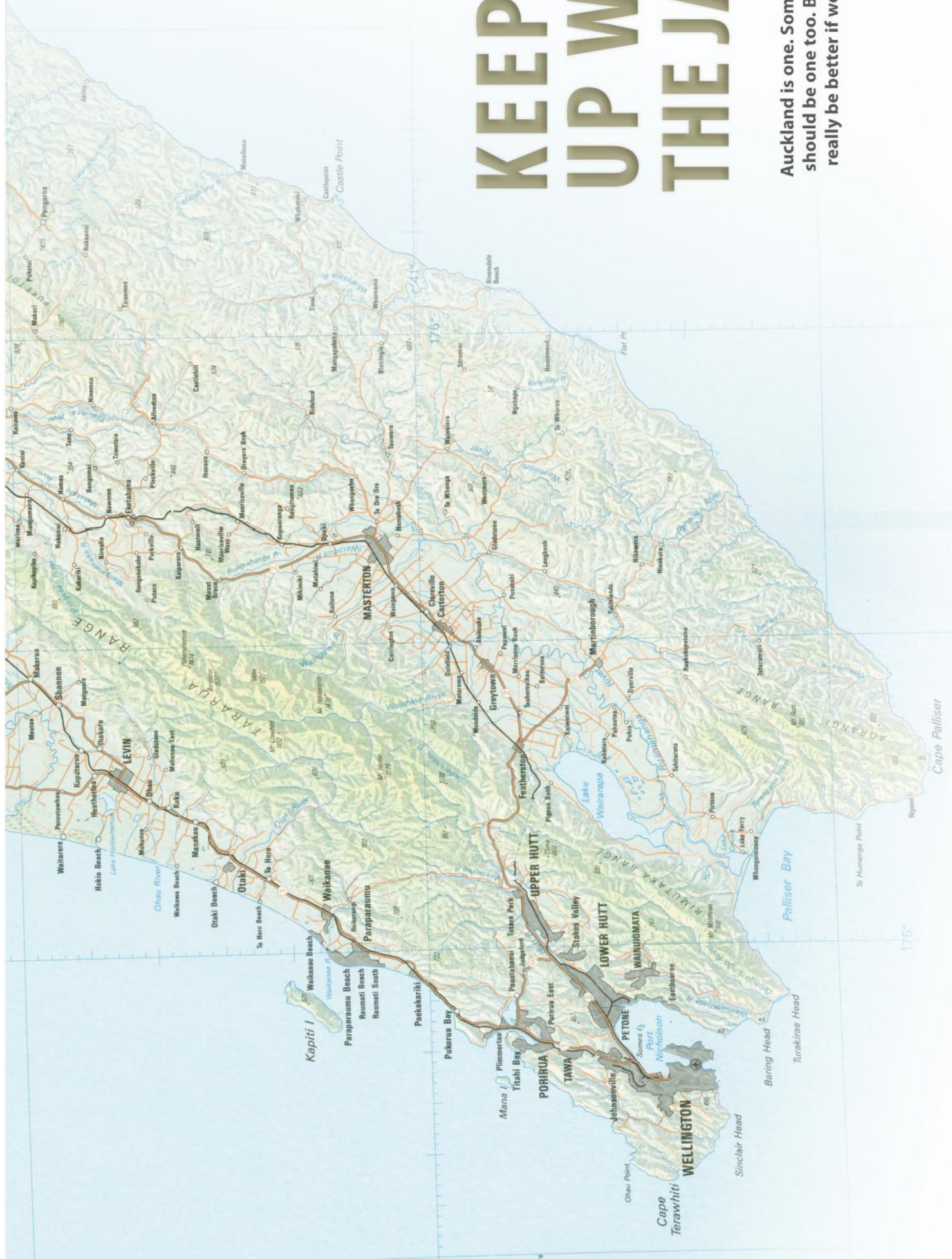


KEEPING UP WITH THE JAFAS

Auckland is one. Some think Wellington should be one too. But would our lives really be better if we were a supercity?

By Max Rashbrooke



Auckland, it's given us a lot, hasn't it? *Outrageous Fortune*. Urban sprawl.

Shorland Street, The Sky Tower, Eric Watson, Nicky Watson. The worst excesses of wealth and fame. The bulk of our country's economic growth. And now... the supercity.

In a normal world, the work of rejigging local councils into more or less sensible units of government doesn't much bother most people, me included. But it's hard to ignore this one. Auckland's local councils, by most accounts, used to be a squabbling, dysfunctional, petty-minded mass of medieval-style baronies. Now, merged into one gleaming, smooth-functioning, streamlined machine, they look set to dominate the city versus city scramble for power and resources.

Of course, their current infighting over rates changes (short version: Devcomp to pay more, Orara to pay less) is a sign that the merger hasn't solved all the city's problems just yet. But it does seem to allow Auckland to speak with one, clearer, voice, and thus to exert more power over more than its fair share of the pie.

The perception that this is so - which plays on Wellingtonians' perennial fear of falling behind our northern rivals - is roughly half the reason why people here are beginning to ask whether we too should become a supercity. The other reason is a feeling, in some quarters, that we just don't know quite where we are going as a region. What are we going to do when our water supply starts to run out? How do we make sure our different economic hubs - Miramar, Wairarapa wineries, and so on - work together properly? How can we put up a sanitary cordon around Lower Hutt on Friday nights to prevent its inhabitants... Sorry, that's a different issue.

But you know what I mean. What, when it comes down to it, is our plan?

Of course, we do already have the Wellington Regional Council, headed up by former MP and former Wellington Mayor Fran Wilde, which manages environmental issues like water quality and flood defences. But it has limited powers, and in most cases is unable to compel the eight local councils - Wellington, Lower Hutt, Upper Hutt, Porirua, Kapiti, South Wairarapa, Carterton, and Masterton - to do anything very much. Hence its (how to put this kindly?)

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relatively low profile.

In a plan that Fran and friends put out late last year, a Wellington Supercity Council would be a regional council on steroids, making all the key strategic decisions for the region, such as how our economy will evolve and where we put vital bits of infrastructure (water plants, major roads, new houses). It would have ten councillors - four from Wellington, three from the Hutt Valley, and one each from the Wairarapa, Porirua and Kapiti - and a mayor elected by the whole region. The eight local councils would stay, but in diminished form, as community centres dealing with local issues - community centres, parks and recreation, street

signs - and without the power to raise their own revenue.

Unsurprisingly, these radical suggestions didn't find universal favour, as the *Dominion Post* reported in a piece entitled 'Regional mayors reject supercity proposal'. (In other news that day, turkeys fail to vote for Christmas; Pope "sceptical" about plans to abolish Catholic Church.) However, the only mayor outright opposed to a supercity is Lower Hutt's Ray Wallace. The others insist, with varying degrees of conviction, that they're open to all ideas for working together; it's just a question of how. We can't yet know, they argue, just how well the Auckland experiment will work, and before we follow suit we should explore other avenues.

As the mayors point out, we already have a regional economic strategy, although it isn't binding, and an agency, Grow Wellington, to carry out its objectives. The councils also run civil defence, some IT services and aspects of the water supply through various regional agreements; research they commissioned last year is looking at further opportunities for such shared services. Meanwhile, the Wairarapa councils have commissioned their own research about what they should do. If all this research finds that more voluntary cooperation won't do the trick, the mayors may, they claim, come around to the idea of a supercity.

Or maybe not. Wellington Mayor Celia Wade-Brown, for one, has an entirely different proposal: that we should think about doing away with the regional council entirely. Many key issues, she claims, over-reach regional borders: the mayors work with the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA) on road projects extending to the Manawatu and the Hawke's Bay, and with the Department of Conservation

on protecting endangered species across central New Zealand. (As Wade-Brown says - and who can argue? - "Birds fly across boundaries from one regional council to another.")

At any rate, most of the mayors feel they have a process underway, and don't appreciate what they see as Wilde undermining them. However, the one mayor who supports Wilde's approach, Porirua's Nick Leggett, says that's completely back to front. As he points out, the mayors received a report by consultants PwC in 2010 that told them bluntly that the status quo is "not an option", and that voluntary cooperation had worked only in "fringe" areas like civil defence, although it didn't look at the alternatives in any detail. But plans to take the report further have been "shut down" by the mayors, Leggett says. "There is no process. There is no chart forward for the discussion or debate."

What about shared services? "We have had shared services on the table for years," Leggett says. "Unless people are compelled to make changes and work with other bureaucracies, it doesn't happen." Wilde, for her part, says plans for shared services "got nowhere" in the last term of local government. There was, for example, a proposal that one council could collect all the rates on behalf of the others to save administration costs. The councils couldn't make it happen, Wilde says. Another example a few years ago the then Wellington mayor Kerry Prendergast proposed a regional amenities rate to fund major projects. "We still haven't got it because people can't agree," Wilde says. "It's like groundbreaking day listening to the mayors saying we'll have more shared services."

This conflict of views has not, it's fair to say, generated a good-tempered debate. Wayne Guppy, the Upper Hutt mayor and chair of the

Mayoral Forum, insists there are "no personal issues" between Wilde and the mayors. "I'm sure the press... can use that argument. They don't get on, they are fighting, they are sniping at each other." It's an easy argument to make. "But then it is an easy argument to make when people say things like, 'I think it [the supercity proposal] is just trying to usurp the situation and jump ahead. The future of Wellington won't be decided by the regional council or the ego of Fran Wilde.'" The author of that quote, from November last year? Wayne Guppy.

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—Upper Hutt Mayor, Wayne Guppy

Other angles, other attacks. Asked about Wade-Brown's view that Wellington might do just fine without a regional council at all, Wilde insists, "I'm not going to attack Celia." Then, in (quite literally) the next breath: "She argues very bizarre things. Celia doesn't know what the regional council does. You should ask NZTA how they would deal with trains if they don't have the regional council, how we would manage the maritime systems in the harbour, how the Hutt Valley is going to fund its river defences. It is just a joke."

Mind you, Wade-Brown can be wounding, too. Claiming that she gets "out and about" at all sorts of community events, she adds, pointedly, "Most of the time you don't see regional

councillors at that sort of event and if you did, you wouldn't know who they were." Kapow!

Now, it would be easy to dismiss all this as a distraction from the actual issues, but when the prize is a harmonious, cooperative Wellington region, the fact that its leaders are at loggerheads must matter. Wilde and her supporters probably need the mayors. After all, the shift to a supercity would require a proper scoping report, which the mayors won't, and Wilde can't, fund, followed by a public debate, which the mayors don't want, not now anyway, and then probably a referendum, which the mayors have no intention of instigating.

The alternatives are to try to build public support for change - which Wilde, Leggett and co. are doing, although anything that involves the phrase 'local government reorganisation' may struggle to spark a revolution - or hope for intervention from above. Whether that will be forthcoming remains unclear. In recent months, Local Government Minister Nick Smith has, variously, insisted there will be "no forced mergers", claimed that Auckland's new system "clearly has the edge", and told *The Listener* that we "just don't need" the extra bureaucracy that regional councils represent. Ultimately, one suspects that he would like to change Wellington's current system, but has absolutely no appetite for the enormous fight that any forced merger would inevitably inspire.

Below: (from left) Setting the agenda: South Wairarapa mayor Adrienne Staples, Wellington mayor Celia Wade-Brown, Porirua mayor Nick Leggett, Local Government minister Nick Smith, Wellington Regional Council chair Fran Wilde, Upper Hutt mayor Wayne Guppy



However, even the hint of gentle pressure being brought to bear really gets the mayors' backs up. "Our main concern", as South Wairarapa's Adrienne Staples puts it, "is that we are being pushed around by the external threat, and people saying, 'Oh, we have to do this [for the government will].'" To which position Leggett responds, robustly, "These are the people that don't want change, so [they should] have the guts to come out and say they don't want change. Don't talk about being bullied."

If change does occur, it may take a middle course. There's probably a case for giving the regional council more power to bang heads and come up with something like Auckland's new supercity spatial plan, which sets out a coherent vision for where and how their city region will develop, complete with designated housing areas and proposed road and rail routes. A more detailed and enforceable economic strategy than we currently have wouldn't hurt, nor would an infrastructure plan.

None of this will necessarily happen in the current set-up, given the way that parochialism hampers attempts to put regional interests first. Staples perhaps unwittingly puts her finger on the problem when she says the Mayoral Forum is "a non-statutory body" that can't enforce anything. As she puts it, "We could all agree in the Mayoral Forum to start a rocket programme to go to the moon, but it has to go back to our individual councils [for approval]." (Who would they like to send to the moon? I think I can guess.)

From rockets to arachnids: Leggett, for his part, describes the current arrangements

as being "like a spider with eight legs, and none of the legs is working in tandem, so it just falls over." Of course, as Guppy points out, a supercity council might not make the parochialism problem disappear: "That will occur even in a supercity because people are [still being] asked to represent their area." Still, it would, one imagines, help keep the spider upright.

In any case, pushing some powers up to the regional council, rather than radically changing

“Wellington will become “a second-rate Canberra”. Fran Wilde warning what will happen if we don't sort out our regional errors”

the status quo, could achieve the strategic leadership we need. Wilde's counter-argument is that it would allow 'rates creep': the regional council would do more, and therefore take more in rates, but local councils would also gradually start working and spending as before, so everyone would end up paying more. But surely this is something that clued-up ratepayers, a feisty bunch at the best of times, could either reject or approve, as they see fit.

On a different, more emotional level, I doubt the Wellington region has the strength of identity to justify a supercity council. Aucklanders have a unity forged by a persistent, if erroneous, belief that everyone south of the Bombay Hills hates them. In contrast, although I like the Wairarapa,

my allegiances are to my current and former homes, the Aro Valley and Eastbourne. These are local, not regional, identities.

Wilde says that's because I'm a yuppie with no kids to take camping in Kaitoke or picnicking in Belmont: "If you had a family, you'd have a slightly wider view of the world." I'm not sure about this – although I do feel condescended to, just slightly – and I think *The Wellingtonian* may have been on the mark when it said last year that, "Kapiti and Eastbourne have their own specific problems."

Arguably, these local issues need our attention just as much as the regional ones. Though no-one would say Wellington's local government is dysfunctional, fewer than 50 percent of people vote and few have any meaningful input into local decisions. But Leggett's council has just won an international award for the way it gets people in Porirua to come together as 'villages' and shape plans for their community, so why not try that more widely? Why not look at other ideas, like giving people the chance to vote directly on part of each year's council budgets? It works in Brazil, you know.

Wilde warns that if we don't sort out our regional errors, Wellington will become "a second-rate Canberra". Having visited that city, I have to say that this is not a happy prospect: even a first-rate Canberra isn't anything to get excited about. But if we were just a little more strategic at the highest level, and much more responsive lower down, we could aim to be, I don't know, a second-rate Oslo or Copenhagen. Now *that* would be something to twit the Aucklanders with.

One council to rule them all?

Options for changing the way Wellington is run

At the moment, there are **eight local councils** in the region, ranging in size from Wellington City Council (198,000 people) to Carterton (7,500 people), all of which have substantial control over issues in their area. Sitting above them, the **Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC)** handles a range of environmental issues, including biosecurity, land management, and parks and forests. It also funds bus and train services and manages water for about half the region.

So what are the options for change?

A Pricewaterhouse Cooper report in 2010 outlined six possible structures:

1. The status quo.
2. Strengthening the regional council by giving it some powers that are currently held by local councils.
3. Forming logical clusters, e.g. merging the three Wairarapa councils into one, or creating one Hutt Valley Council.
4. Establishing a two-tier local government, with regional services delivered by a single regional council. Local services would be delivered by local councils but funding for all services would be through regional rates.
5. Forming two regional unitary authorities (Wellington and Wairarapa) with no local councils.
6. Having a single regional unitary authority with no local councils.

A proposal put forward in November last year by GWRC chair Fran Wilde and some of her regional

councillors suggests turning the GWRC into a unitary authority – **the Wellington Council** – with control over all regional planning and economic development. The current local councils would be turned into 'community councils' funded by the Wellington Council.

Under Wilde's plan, the new Wellington Council would be created at the next local elections, in 2013, and have all powers transferred to it by the following elections in 2016.

Meanwhile, the local council mayors are investigating options for **sharing more services and other forms of collaboration**, but with no fixed timetable.

Given current levels of disagreement, it is difficult to predict when progress, if any, will be made unless central government intervenes.