

MAYOR'S MESSAGE

He kōrero nā te Koromatua

I am proud to present South Waikato District Council's Long Term Plan 2024-34. Getting to this stage has been a sustained effort by elected members, our Chief Executive, and staff, and with our stakeholders and community joining in like never before. I thank you all for your input and passion for this great District.

We have completed this planning process as openly as possible. We received a record number of submissions and appearances at hearings which generated great discussion and helped us shape and decide the work this Council needs to get on with.

We know it is a challenging time for everyone but doing the same things in the same old ways was never going to be the right approach. This plan is aspirational with the bold vision of delivering a thriving South Waikato community and robust economy that outpaces the rest of New Zealand. That will be accomplished through goals focusing on shifting the dials in employment, housing, the economy and the environment.

We acknowledge that times are tough, but we need to set strong foundations for a better future. We have stuck to our word of not overspending, keeping it tight and focusing on the services you all expect. No Councillor wants to raise rates for no reason, and we have balanced the must-do and forward investment while producing this plan.

The average rate rise for year one will be 8.9% and details of the following years can be found in this plan. We have responded to the significant challenges outlined in the consultation document, providing the pathway forward to deliver capital expenditure of \$270m for our residents and business owners.

There were varied views submitted around the timeline for our financial approach, some said go slower while others encouraged us to be bold and stick to what was needed for the long-term gain. We have said there would be no more borrowing of funds to operate and by year four the Council will be in the black and fully funding operational costs.

The Council organisation has also cut its cloth by committing to an operational efficiency saving of \$29m across this plan. We have adjusted our fees and charges so that where appropriate, the user who benefits from the service pays for it rather than being a burden on general ratepayers. There was broad support for this approach, which takes effect immediately. This reinforces the financial direction we started as a Council last year and it is the best direction for our District's long-term future.

A clear message we received during submissions was that we must look after the things we have, and it is also prudent to investigate the holding of several assets as to how best the Council could better optimise their community value in support of this plan.

Investing into our ageing three waters infrastructure is necessary and the plan includes a \$150m capital program which will be delivered across the District and allows us to respond to the Local Waters Done Well requirements currently being legislated by Central Government.

We have made room for a \$17m investment in the South Waikato Indoor Pools. If the Council did not take this decision and path there would be no other option but to close it down and lose it forever. Delaying the project does not make a substantial difference to the average rates and we would not have the certainty around the contractors and cost that the market currently provides.

There are some things in the plan: education, employment and housing outcomes that drew comments about what the Council should focus on as its core business. While the Council may not deliver these services, it is certainly part of our District leadership and advocacy responsibility to encourage the wellbeing of our communities through better outcomes in these areas. We all agree we need better education, employment, and housing achievement for our current and future generations.

This plan directs the Council to look for opportunities to be involved in collaboration and partnerships with the owners and stakeholders of those Government services, which deliver better outcomes for our District.

While the elected members have had hard discussions and made final decisions, it is now important to deliver on this plan which we will report on each year during the Annual Plan and Annual Report processes.

As Mayor, I promise you that this Council will roll up its sleeves, continue the hard mahi and deliver through a purposeful plan that remains simple, tight, and robust.

Mayor Gary Petley

