Inauguration Speech

Daran Ponter, Chair, Greater Wellington Regional Council

30 October 2025

Kia ora koutou

Ngā mihi ki Te Kaunihera me Te Pane Matua Taiao

Kia ora ki Te Atiawa Taranaki Whānui me Ngāti Toa Rangatira, ti Toa Rangatira, ngā mana whenua me te taiao ne. Thank you both for bringing us on and welcoming us today.

Morena whanau, friends, councillors and mayors from across the region, welcome to the Greater Wellington Regional Council.

Councillors, congratulations on your election to the Greater Wellington Regional Council.

Shamia, Gabriel, Nigel, Tom, Sarah, Phil and Clare – welcome to the Regional Council. I understand all of you came by public transport today…. that's a good start!

To the old hands, Adrienne, Penny, Ros, Simon, Quentin and Yadana – welcome back. Last triennium couldn't have been too bad.

Congratulations also go to the new and returned councillors and Mayors across the region, noting in particular our very own Fauono Ken Laban, as Mayor of Hutt City.

And also noting the stunningly positive result in the referendum for the Greater Wellington Regional Council's Māori constituency, and indeed for all Māori ward council referenda in the Wellington region – Te Upoko o te Ika has spoken!

Councillors, thank you for your confidence in Councillor Staples and me. We will strive to make this as inclusive and co-ordinated a Council as we have for the previous two triennia.

Greater Wellington is a region dragged from the sea by Maui. It spans only 3% of Aotearoa's land area but has 10% of its population. A region of rugged beauty, well connected and with an abundance of intelligent, happy and smiling people...and a few grumpy ones - some of whom will make themselves known to you! A region with the potential to grow as the engine room for New Zealand industry, creativity and endeavour.

This is going to be a great triennium. A lot will be asked of us as we navigate fiscally challenging times, significant reforms, and the need to plan ahead for the future.

But first, it's worth reflecting on the past three years. A time we cemented relations with mana whenua, made significant strides in resetting our region's natural resources plan, started a journey with Ngāti Kahungunu and Rangitane in relation to Wairarapa Moana, commenced works on RiverLink, championed government co-investment into flood control, completed major capital investments in our bulk water supply assets in the Hutt Valley, purchased additional land for the East Harbour Regional Park, commenced a more aggressive programme of revegetation of our regional parks, identified land for a new Wairarapa Regional Park, and tackled issues related to rescue capability in the Cook Strait.

We signed off a new hybrid train fleet, the total refurbishment of the Wairarapa line and Remutaka Tunnel, investment in the Wellington "throat" and the replacement of all wooden traction poles on the rail network. Plus, investment in three new publicly owned bus depots, further electrification of our bus fleet, the introduction of new routes and capacity, and big strides in bus reliability.

To Mayor Ken Laban and Thomas Nash, councillors in the last triennium, who are here today, we thank you for your significant contributions. Thank you for your regional service.

As in the last triennium we will be guided by a highly competent team of Greater Wellington staff and the knowledge and connections that you as councillors bring to the table.

As part of what has become the tikanga of our Council table we will strive for consensus. It's not always possible, but when achieved, decisions are more robust and stand the test of time. It can make for some bloody long discussions, but the results are worth it.

Rates

Our biggest challenge is to sink a lid on rates increases, while navigating the trade-offs around service cuts this will inevitably bring.

As we did in this financial year, we will get to a lower rates number than set out in or Long-Term Plan, but with that will come questions around quality and levels of service. And we will all find ourselves having to make choices and compromises.

Regional Ambition

We are a regional council, and proudly so. You will be challenged to think regionally. That doesn't mean you leave your communities behind. The challenge is to balance a regional approach with a community heart. Understanding how regional and network approaches play out in your local communities is vital intelligence you must bring to this table.

One of the big challenges of this triennium will settling a Regional Ambition and feeding that into a statutory Regional Spatial Plan under the new RMA. This is our opportunity as a population of 520,000 people to identify how and where we grow over the coming 30-50 years.

This Ambition will identify how we intensify urban development around our transport corridors and transport hubs. It will be a catalyst for new investment and new centres of excellence, the industry that comes with them, and high-quality jobs.

This will unlock the door for regional and government funding and private investment in the region. But to get there we will need all Iwi and Council partners to be pulling on the oars – no mean feat for the Wellington Region. The Wellington Regional Leadership

Committee, Wellington NZ and our key business partners are critical to these discussions.

Public Transport

We have a public transport network we can be proud of. But in places it is fragile and will reach capacity.

I would like to thank successive governments for their support for rail investment. We have kept the pressure on to renew our rail infrastructure, and we will continue this push.

Now we need to turn our attention to modern European Train Control signalling, further double tracking and upgrading our rail stations.

We will continue to advocate for more bus priority lanes, including opening up the Harbour Quays for public transport. We will also put mass rapid transport back on the table. In time Wellington will grow, and it will grow upwards. I know that Mayor Little is keen to catalyse housing development in the city, along core corridors already earmarked for intensification. We need to anticipate intensification with a plan for a high-capacity public transport

system that moves and connects large numbers of people quickly and reliably

I stand beside Mayor Little in advocating for the Wellington equivalent of Auckland's Eke Panuku – an urban regeneration vehicle working with the private sector and Kāinga Ora to provide the right conditions for quality intensive housing along transport corridors and around transport hubs. Once in motion that vehicle has the potential to be rolled out to other metropolitan centres.

Finally, on public transport, there seems to be some progress on the national ticketing solution, which whenever you ask, always seems to be two years away!

We are fully committed to the introduction of a national system, and ahead of this we will introduce customer improvements including bank card contactless payments in the next year.
As part of the rollout of the national ticketing solution we will also change our fare offerings – to include fare capping and integrated fares for bus-rail journeys.

The Regional Transport Committee brings together all Councils and primary government agencies to prioritise transport

investment across the region. Over the coming three years Greater Wellington will be seeking to influence:

a. greater prioritisation of grade separation of rail crossings on Wellington's electric network;
b. works to safely speed up services on the network; and
c. a reset of the rail renewals and modernisation works, so the multitude of rail projects can more easily be seen as a clear and coherent pipeline of works, and we as Greater Wellington can better advocate for government investment.

Regional Parks

Greater Wellington administers more than 50,000 ha of regional parks. In this triennium we will recommit to replanting our regional parks.

We will work towards formalising a regional park in the Wairarapa. We will push the government to release land above Paekākāriki for recreation and other purposes. And we will confirm the path for bringing the newly acquired Gollan's Valley land into the East Harbour Regional Park.

Pest Control

In this triennium, we will look to continue our investment in predator control programmes like Predator 2050 and identify ways in which we can be more efficient in exterminating pests and protecting our biodiversity. We will also investigate how similar focused programmes can be initiated beyond Wellington.

Flood Control

Flooding impacts more people, more often than any other natural hazard in the Wellington Region.

In the flood control area, we will continue working hand in hand with the government on co-investment in flood control schemes – a partnership that has resulted in government co-investment in 16 flood control schemes in our region in the last two years. The RiverLink programme is well underway and most of the flood control works will be completed this triennium.

Meanwhile water resilience has been identified as a critical priority for the Wairarapa. The risks of inaction are significant, but with a coordinated approach the Wairarapa can build a resilient water future that supports its people, economy, and environment.

Local Government Reform

Some say local government reform is the elephant in the room. Many have tried and failed. As a Council, we have previously stood in support of local government reform, where that involves our communities in informing the decision-making process. I don't see that position changing.

But before the region further considers local government reform we need two things:

a) for the government to streamline the pathway to local government reform; and
b) for resource management reforms to be bedded in first.

Whatever the case, I do not propose that the regional council leads out on local government reform. Exercises like this can be a huge distraction to the everyday work of the Council.

Councillors, we have only just begun. I have described many challenges and opportunities ahead of us – essentially choices. Let's use our collective experience, know-how and tenacity to work for the better of our region and our communities over the next three years.

I look forward to sharing the journey with you.

Kia kaha to us all.

Kia ora koutou.