

# AT-Fullers contract called 'affront to democracy'

A \$350 million contract awarded by Auckland Transport to Fullers 360 and funded by Auckland ratepayers has been called an "affront to democracy" by the Auckland Ratepayers' Alliance.

The Waiheke route is excluded from the contract to deliver ferry services on the Devonport, Half Moon Bay and Hobsonville routes for 12 years. The ferry company and Waiheke have had a tumultuous relationship and bringing Devonport into this new contract leaves Waiheke as the last Auckland ferry port excluded from the Public Transport Operating Model (PTOM).

Waiheke residents are fully reliant on ferries as a mode of travel from the island, as opposed to Devonport and Half Moon Bay, from which travel around Auckland by other means is possible. A monthly fare of \$345 has been instituted recently but falls short in comparison to monthly fares in other parts of Auckland. This was a move Councillor Chris Darby described to *Stuff* on 15 June 2022 as "not able to meet islander's expectations" and "interim".



Green MP Chlöe Swarbrick says it is "mind blowing" that a 12-year contract could be awarded, considering how even the council's own long-term plans extend for just a decade. Photo Benj Brooking

The Waiheke service was excluded from the new contract due to extra funding required from Auckland Transport or central government, *The New Zealand Herald* reported on 17 November.

Auckland Transport recently spent \$100 million on building seven ferries. Five are hybrid ferries and two are fully electric. The council also spent \$15 million buying and upgrading existing Fullers ferries. This is exclusive of the just-signed contract.

Auckland ratepayers will fund the contract, a decision made without public consultation or input from elected members, Ratepayers Alliance spokesperson

Josh Van Veen says. "Such decisions are too important to be made behind closed doors by unelected officers and directors with no democratic accountability or recourse to the public."

Van Veen says Mayor Brown promised to bring AT and the other Council Controlled Organisations (CCOs) into line. "To make good on his promise, he must advocate to central government for a legislative change that will transfer power from AT back to the Governing Body."

There have been questions regarding Fullers' levels of service which might have warranted a review. Fullers has been under fire for the frequency of



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ferry delays based on circumstances, such as cruise ships coming into port. A spokeswoman for Ports of Auckland says she can't speak for Fullers, but the port has noticed some inaccuracies in reasons given for Fullers' cancellations of ferries. "We noticed when a cruise ship is in around 6am, Fullers was cancelling ferries at around 7am to 7:45am," she says. As reported in *The New Zealand Herald* on 7 October, Fullers says it will move to its busier summer timetable 15 crews or 60 staff short of the number required for its "optimal" summer timetable of 122 sailings per week. It's set to be nine sailings short of that target.

Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick says that given the longstanding dissatisfaction with Fullers services across the Waitematā, particularly in light of present service shortfalls and the PTOM negotiations, she would have expected public disclosure and consultation prior to the shaping up of this contract. "The Local Government Act 2002, which all elected members recently affirmed their commitment to, upholds a robust requirement of consultation with communities," she says.

Chlöe says that the problem here appears to be Auckland Transport's decision-making, which is not held to the same standard. "The role that I can and will be playing is ensuring that Auckland Transport answer the many questions about how on earth they made this decision. But this council-controlled organisation is ultimately accountable to Auckland Council," she says.

It is "mind-blowing", she says, that a 12-year contract could be awarded, considering how even the council's own long-term plans extend for just a decade. "Many in our new council were sworn in on promises of transparency, including our new mayor. It is precisely their role to ensure this occurs and I will be regularly checking in on progress," she says.

Chloe says her frustrations with Auck-



"The Auckland Transport deal seems to provide iron-clad guarantees to the overseas shareholders of Fullers," says Mike Lee.

land Transport's "frequent nonsensical decisions", making it incredibly difficult to cycle, walk and use public transport and contribute to climate omissions have never been secret. "While I have continued to engage as constructively as possible, AT is directly accountable to council," she says.

Chlöe says she has been heavily engaged with the Minister of Transport's office, requesting "a positive conclusion to the years of PTOM debacle, or at the least an update on the process for our community before the end of the year".

Councillor Mike Lee says that AT's explanation raises more questions than it answers.

"Devonport has always been a commercial service, as it has been a guaranteed money spinner for Fullers just like the Waiheke service. We question why the Devonport service is to be included in this new AT subsidised regime though not Waiheke. It is hardly consistent or even coherent," he says.

Mike says a huge sum of ratepayers' money is being committed - and over a very long period. Normally council spending is restricted to 10-year long-term plans. "As Auckland Transport uses the terms 'forecasted' and 'estimated amount', the cost if this deal is likely to blow out further," he says.

"The Auckland Transport deal seems to provide iron-clad guarantees to the overseas shareholders of Fullers but given what has happened to the recent retrenchment of AT managed bus and train services, in reality it offers very little to ferry users."

Mike says the Auckland Transport deal is expensive, inconsistent and provides little in tangible guarantees for ferry users. His conclusion: "AT is using ratepayers funds to lock in place a foreign-owned monopoly for at least 12 years."

Fullers is under the umbrella of In-Motion Group, based in Edinburgh and owned by Scottish entrepreneur Sir Brian Souter. • *Olivia Walker*

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