

# Environmental group calls out “lenient” helipad rules

The chief executive of the Environmental Defence Society wrote to Mayor Phil Goff and Councillor Chris Darby this month, calling out “lenient” planning rules that he says are open to allowing a proliferation of helipads on Hauraki Gulf Islands.

Gary Taylor, CNZM, QSO, has been at the helm of the environmental protection think-tank for 20 years, and says in his letter to the mayor and councillor, that delaying any change to the current helipad consenting process cannot wait until 2026 when a review of Auckland’s unitary plan is due.

Taylor says the Environmental Defence Society (EDS) is concerned that the rules that provide for helicopter activity within the Hauraki Gulf Islands District Plan are too lenient and are resulting in unintended consequences.

He says that the rules, as currently drafted, will provide for a significant increase in helicopter activity on Aotea Great Barrier, as Waiheke has already experienced.

To ensure the protection of Aotea’s characteristics, the environmental society is seeking an urgent review of the plan provisions relating to air travel and the notification of a plan change with immediate legal effect.

In addition, Taylor says the planning framework should enable a broader assessment of adverse effects.

He says the assumption that as long as a helipad consent is complying with noise limits, it is providing for residential amenity values, is not necessarily accurate and

should be reconsidered.

“Aotea is a place high in natural character, wildness and serenity. It is a remote, rural island with scattered settlements largely isolated from one another. These are the characteristics that make Aotea special and are values that are not conducive with the constant buzzing of helicopters,” reads Taylor’s letter.

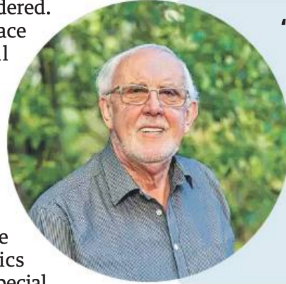
“We understand that Auckland Council planners are very preoccupied with urban priorities at present. Aotea may be remote, but you have been charged with protecting it. We do not consider the plan change we propose to be especially onerous and it should be factored into the council’s work program on an urgent basis.”

Taylor’s letter also notes the availability of two airports on Aotea where private helicopters could land, limiting the need for further helipads scattered over the island.

“There are two airports on Aotea with regular commercial flights departing from both. Claris airport is mere minutes from the private residences where helipads are currently being applied for or granted.

Convenient access is therefore provided for helicopter landings there, along with fixed-wing aircraft, and the provision of private helipads is, in essence, providing super-convenience for the applicants at the cost of the amenity values of the island.”

Taylor says the restricted discretion-



**“We do not consider the plan change we propose to be especially onerous and it should be factored into the council’s work program on an urgent basis.” - Gary Taylor**

ary pathway for helipad consents also significantly restricts the ability of decision-makers to take into account the wider context of the island and its values.

“Discretion is limited to the visual effects of any earthworks or retaining structures, or noise effects. Noise effects, if compliant with the noise limits, are also not considered to adversely affect amenity values. This is on the basis that the noise limits have been set at a level that can still provide reasonable levels of residential amenity.

“Given that amenity values are those primarily in contention with helicopter use, this presents difficulty, not only for restricted discretionary activities but also those assessed as full discretionary. Cumulative effects are able to be considered as an assessment criteria; however, using neighbouring Waiheke Island as a comparator, it appears that significant numbers of helipads can be consented before the noise threshold is met.”

Gulf News contacted Mayor Goff and Councillor Darby for a response to the Environmental Defence Society letter this week but did not hear back in time for publication. • *Sophie Boladeras*

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# Council report on helicopter controls falls well short of expectations

A council report in response to Waiheke, Aotea and Waitemata local board concerns around helipad consents and helicopter activities has done little to alleviate the boards' woes.

The report, prepared by Auckland Council's plans and places and resource consents departments, was up for discussion at its planning committee meeting this week.

The memo responded to queries from the three local boards over the potential for Unitary and Hauraki Gulf Islands plan changes, an Environment Court ruling on the status of helipads, helicopter flight path oversight and the monitoring of consent conditions.

After viewing the report, Waiheke Local Board chairperson Cath Handley said she was disappointed that it appeared little action was proposed to limit helicopter activity and tighten up the consent process.

One of the board requests, which sought an investigation into updating helipad consent rules under the Hauraki Gulf Islands (HGI) plan, was considered too costly and time-consuming.

"It is important to note that at this point in time," reads the report, "the plans and places department does not have the resources available to complete the work that would be required to evaluate, and if appropriate, prepare a plan change to the HGI Plan".

The memo also stated that the current planning provisions for helipads are "sufficiently clear" and it recommended that council should not seek a declaration in the Environment Court.

In December 2021, the board asked the

council to seek an urgent ruling in the Environment Court to establish whether helipads should default to non-complying under the general rules of the Hauraki Gulf Islands plan and to identify whether the scope of council's definition of "amenity" values under the plan is adequate or should be broadened to include considerations of the amenity of the population at large and visitors.

This week, Handley said she was dismayed to see the recommendation that the council should not seek a declaration in the Environment Court.

"They have dismissed going to the Environment Court for a decision, yet this would be the fastest and most affordable way of recognising if the provisions of the Hauraki Gulf Islands plan are being appropriately applied in a balanced way.

"A declaration from the Environment Court would take the issue forward a great deal. It would give a concrete

indication of changes that could occur to make the plan more fit for purpose."

The single immediate action deemed feasible in the report is a six-month monitoring programme of all Waiheke helipads and their conditions of consent - something lobby group Quiet Sky Waiheke and the local board say should have been happening anyway.

The council report acknowledges the lack

of information on flight data and consent condition compliance and report recommends that the council's compliance and monitoring department start the monitoring programme immediately.

Council staff would also work with the Civil Aviation Authority to analyse any available flight tracking data to get an overview of current levels and patterns of helicopter activity.

Once the compliance investigation is complete, a report will be prepared for the planning committee providing an analysis of the results. At that time, the

committee would again look into the potential for a plan change within the Hauraki Gulf Islands (HGI) District Plan.

The report also notes that the Civil Aviation Authority holds a wider database of flight information, and discussions are under way to give Auckland Council access to the data, which, once analysed, will also have a bearing on whether

changes to planning provisions are warranted.

Auckland Council's planning committee was due to discuss the report in response to local board helicopter concerns on Thursday, 31 March, after *Gulf News* went to print. Any planning committee decisions will be included in the 7 April *Gulf News* edition. • *Sophie Boladeras*

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**Kia ora koutou**  
**Thank you all**  
 for your submissions on the Hākaimangō –  
 Matiatia Marine Reserve application which had  
 1,303 submissions with 93% support.

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