

## Research Article

## Waiheke Island: An island paradise facing an uncertain future

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**Abstract:** Waiheke Island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf shares similarities with once isolated coastal areas on the periphery of large cities. Now a commuter suburb and popular tourist destination only a 35-min ferry ride from downtown Auckland, it is under increasing development pressure. However, it remains differentiated from other urban fringe settings by dimensions of its islandness: weak infrastructure, restricted transportation networks and robust community politics. The resulting pressure on infrastructure and services is now being compounded by debates related to the Auckland housing crisis. This report, based on interviews with permanent and part-time residents, explores competing imaginaries of the island's futures.

**Key words:** development pressure, future imaginary, marine suburb, unique lifestyle, water issue.

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### Introduction

Waiheke is the second largest and the most accessible inhabited island in the Hauraki Gulf. Only 35 min by passenger ferry to Auckland's CBD, the island is also connected to Auckland by regular vehicular ferry services. 'Alternative life-stylers', sheep farmers and holiday homeowners largely populated the island 30 years ago. Today, while its natural environments and the cultural features of the past remain written on its landscapes, it is a very different place. The introduction of fast ferries in 1987 greatly reduced commuting times, and this enhanced accessibility was influential in a 25% increase in population between 1986 and 1991. Further growth has subsequently occurred. The development of commercial grape growing in the 1980s stimulated a wine tourism industry on the island that has experienced significant growth over the last 15 years. Its permanent

inhabitants now number around 8900 (June 2015) and include professional commuters and some of New Zealand's wealthiest individuals. Waiheke's proximity to Auckland and 'its unique combination of harbour, beaches and scenery coupled with its range of cultural features' also make it an attractive visitor destination for Aucklanders as well as other domestic and international tourists (Baragwanath & Lewis 2014)<sup>1</sup>. Waiheke receives an estimated one million visitors a year. Many are day visitors, including elderly 'Gold Card' holders who travel free on buses and ferries. Its population increases by an estimated 3500 when the island's second homes (or 'baches') are occupied and swells to around 30 000 in the peak holiday period.

This report adds to other recent literature on the changing social dynamics of Waiheke (see Coleman & Kearns 2015; Coleman *et al.* 2016)

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in examining the development pressures that have come with change on the island and the way that these are dealt with in the politics of its social life. It asks how this politics is being reworked in the current context of the battle over the island's 'development', which is increasingly influenced by Auckland-wide debates about housing availability and affordability. I argue that as an island, Waiheke remains a space of exception (Stratford 2006), despite the increasing and concentrating pressures for change. At the heart of these pressures lies the proximity of the island to the urban 'mainland'. For example, in a 2015 survey (see below), residents described Waiheke as 'an outpost of Auckland', a 'marine suburb' of Auckland and even 'Auckland's playground'. Various actors are converging on the island: local businesses from vineyards to cafes, artists, real estate agents and ferry companies seek to encourage more visitors; members of Auckland's professional classes are exploring the possibility of commuting from this island suburb; and property developers as well as city planners are eyeing the possibility of building new suburbs on the fringes of Waiheke's built-up area. The net effect is that Waiheke is becoming increasingly entangled in Auckland's development dynamics. Against this background, a vibrantly politicised community is struggling to sustain its exceptionalism.

### Character, identity and politics

Waiheke is notable for the strength of its distinctive community identities (Rimoldi 2006; Baragwanath & Lewis 2014). These identities include its long-established and relatively isolated local rural communities, as well as its 'alternative lifestyles', and have been shaped at least in part by the isolations of islandness (see Stratford 2006; Conkling 2007; Vannini 2011). Baragwanath (2010) suggests that the development pressures at work on Waiheke have begun to challenge these identities and the economy and social institutions that underpin them. The arrival of new money, new demands on infrastructure, rising residential rents and house prices and new development ethics have shocked the island out of its comfortable localisms and 'proximate isolation'

(see Baragwanath & Lewis 2014, 2016). While not all areas have yet been directly affected by new building, all have felt the increased pressures on infrastructure and, indeed, are likely to have benefited from enhanced services and economic activity. Areas most affected to date are those located on the Western half of the island, especially at Oneroa, Palm Beach and Onetangi on the northern slopes. The recent (August 2016) decision by the Auckland Council, which administers the island, to remove the rural-urban boundary (RUB) from the Metropolitan Urban Limit has generated new fears that development will spread to the Eastern half of the island.

Several of the island's communities have already begun to mobilise politically against this possibility. The island is notoriously political and fiercely independent. While the amalgamation of Auckland's multiple Territorial Local Authorities into a single Auckland City Council in 1989 challenged the independent political culture of the island, it remains one of the most politically engaged of the new (as of 2011) super-city's constitutive communities (Baragwanath 2010). Its award-winning newspaper, the *Gulf News*, is arguably the most politically charged, left-leaning and alternative-thinking community newspaper in the country, and much of its coverage centres on and works to sustain a strong anti-development tradition (see Table 1). Community groups have successfully fought development plans for a marina development and a large entry village at Matiatia for decades. Simply put, there are competing imaginaries of what the island may look like in the future, including those of alternative life-stylers, conservationists, high net worth exiles from urban life, developers/modernisers and anti-modernists. These imaginaries are contested in vibrant island politics, which is attentive to wider Auckland and national politics and imposes itself disproportionately on Auckland-scale political debates (see Baragwanath 2010; Baragwanath & Lewis 2014).

### *A (new, traditional) geography of development politics*

In this Research Note, I explore the ways in which these debates around Waiheke's future are centring on familiar longer-term matters of

**Table 1** *Gulf News* headlines – Waiheke Island’s dominant politics

Date	Headlines from <i>Gulf News</i>
2008	
21 Feb	Friends of the street on strike
10 Apr	Spencer family stir fierce outrage with proposed beach development
16 Apr	A perverse notion: democracies improve if fewer people are involved
8 May	Proposed district plan could ‘undo Waiheke’
5 Jun	Roundabout scrapped
5 Jun	Council caned over wharf bylaw (Community board declined to endorse a section re collection of fees)
5 Jun	Tui Street consultancy contested
19 Jun	Activists prepare for cycle action
28 Aug	‘Coffin’ protest at ferry fare increase
18 Sep	Defiant meeting bins wheelies
4 Dec	The proposed plan Cycle Action Waiheke
2009	
19 Mar	Waiheke why wait hui
26 Mar	Waihekeans start campaign to retain Clean Stream service
2 Apr	No machine can outperform 8000 householders
18 Jun	Urgent public meeting for island’s waste
23 Jul	Dumping Auckland City a ‘formula for disaster’ but a warranted protest
6 Aug	Proposed Gulf island plan should be scrapped say community groups
2010	
6 May	Emotions run high over Matiatia urupa site recognition
2011	
20 Jan	Residents want action over black and grey waters
7 Apr	Feelings run high over traffic-free road
14 Apr	Council bows to island opinion over purpose-built library
16 Jun	Factions line up to fight over headland
2012	
26 Jan	Countdown Supermarket deemed more culturally important than trees
9 Feb	Chop Down Count Down banners as pohutukawas protest flourishes
16 Feb	‘Stop Paving over Paradise’ says new action group
22 Mar	3-Storey house on beach inappropriate
2013	
3 Jan	Planners and Planning issues dominate news
21 Feb	Council help with drought a ‘last resort’
15 Mar	Secrecy compromising councils watchdog role?
8 Aug	Submissions ditched; council committee sends Marina directly to Environment Court
15 Aug	Dismay as Matiatia marina referred to Environment Court
17 Oct	The community has spoken
12 Dec	Workshops as submitters formalise participation in Matiatia Marina hearings
2014	
16 Jan	Waiheke’s “Woodstock” doubles Matiatia marina fighting fund
23 Jan	Pent up demand pushes property sales
27 Feb	No room for mediation in Matiatia marina case, says Judge
2015	
9 Jul	Auckland Transport drops objection to marina
6 Aug	Couple do bit to protect island
24 Sep	Island doesn’t dig planting policy (re verge planting of fruit trees and vegetables)
Headlines from other newspapers	
NZ Herald Aug 2016	Development by stealth on Waiheke Island
Waiheke Marketplace Aug 2016	Commission talks to Waiheke locals about application for unitary council
Sep 2016	Tension mounts at local board over potential for development on Waiheke Island

concern dealing with questions of physical geography and infrastructure. The full set of these issues includes water supply and wastewater management; roading, transportation and access; the setting of the RUB, land valuation and land-use competition; and issues of soil stability, erosion and flood risk associated with intensive housing. In this Note, I focus attention on three of these issues: the RUB, water resources and wastewater disposal. The work is based on a series of face-to-face interviews in December 2015 and January 2016 with 20 participants who were asked about their perspectives on development issues. These were complemented by a desk-based analysis of newspaper reports and public documents sourced from the Auckland Council.

### *The rural–urban boundary*

The Waiheke RUB is designed to protect against urban sprawl and separates the urbanised western side of the island from the rural eastern side. It is a tool of Auckland planning regulation and is embedded in the Regional Policy Statement, which is an important part of the new Auckland City's planning architecture. At a meeting of Council in August 2016, councillors decided to remove the RUB from the Regional Policy Statement. However, the objectives and policies in the existing Hauraki Gulf Island District Plan will remain operative until that plan is wrapped into the Unitary Plan, which will deal with how Auckland will grow and develop as a metropolitan region over the coming years. The Auckland Council Director of Regulatory Services warned that 'people shouldn't think they could go onto the eastern side and start building villages' (*Waiheke Marketplace*, September 2016). The chairperson of the Waiheke Local Board (the Island's local-level representative organisation within the Council), Paul Walden, filed papers challenging the removal of the RUB in the High Court on behalf of the Straits Protection Society Inc. (a Waiheke community organisation).

This move was the latest in a long line of combative and spirited interventions from activist community groups across Waiheke's history, many of which have been in reaction to development agendas. It represents a sample of the views of the community as laid out

in 'Essentially Waiheke' (EW), a Council-established community development framework that aims to inform decisions on matters affecting the island and its communities. In its own words, EW 'holds our concerns, our hopes and aspirations and our vision for the future of our island ... the voice of the motu (island)' (Auckland City Council 2016). The latest framework (see Auckland City Council 2016), which builds on earlier versions (Auckland City Council, 2000, 2005), incorporates views, opinions and aspirations expressed by more than 600 people (roughly 7% of the population) over 7 months of engagement in 2016. Among those consulted were short- and long-term residents, tourists, professionals and subject matter experts, local community groups and associations, the Waiheke Local Board, Piritahi Marae and the Ngāti Paoa Iwi Trust. While accepting that the 'proximity to Auckland and its easy accessibility, will undoubtedly mean growth is likely,' EW asserts:

One of the most important aspects ... [of the community's vision] ... is the declaration of the island's rural and village character (underlining a boundary to the Metropolitan Urban Limits-MUL, now the Rural Urban Boundary-RUB) and the divide between eastern and western Waiheke, now incorporated into the Operative District Plan.

In short, EW argues that any further development ought to be on terms set or agreed to by the community. Furthermore, the terms effectively set by EW include an explicit concern with *mana whenua* (those with customary authority) values, especially 'the role and responsibility to exercise their *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) of an area in accordance with *tikanga Māori* (Māori world view)'. Such collaborative engagement with *iwi* is an increasingly important and required part of development thinking and action in the 21st century, post-Treaty-settlement New Zealand. It is in these terms that EW also argues for the value of 'EW' itself as an institution for facilitating real sustainable development and safeguarding the island's special and economically valuable character, and insists upon its continuation.

The contradiction between EW's views and the Council's intention to remove the RUB is therefore important, not just to Waiheke's development initiatives but to the future of local governance in New Zealand. EW was established and continues to be funded in part to mobilise and channel the island's political activity towards strategic and progressive outcomes. The RUB is important to the island's community but not to development interests on the island or the wider strategic interests of a city grappling with a crisis of affordable housing and increasingly exhorted by national government and certain interests within the City to address this crisis by increasing housing supply. Put simply, Waiheke is caught in a city-wide and national political project to expand the area available for housing in Auckland and to build new houses rapidly. The challenge is to find ways of continuing to assert local values in the face of this agenda, and it appears that Waiheke is embracing this challenge, notwithstanding the parlous state of some of the housing occupied by the island's older residents (Coleman *et al.* 2016).

#### *Water resources and wastewater disposal*

EW states that there is a sense of pride around the island residents' close relationship with nature. This pride is particularly apparent in terms of household water supplies and disposal of wastewater. Island households rely on rainwater collection supplemented by groundwater bores. Although most Waihekeans rely on roof-captured rainwater, the groundwater freshwater supply fails at 5-year return drought events, and there is evidence that even with a more effective use of bores and restoring those that are currently inactive to cope with periods of drought, it will not properly sustain the further growth of population (Koh & Boyle 2010). For locals, water conservation is practised as part of daily life on the island. The Waiheke Resources Trust (2015), for example, works with 'The Sustainable Living Centre' at the 'EcoMatters Environment Trust' in New Lynn to provide information and free water-saving devices to Waiheke households. Peak holiday periods, however, mean an influx of second homeowners and visitors, most of whom are not inculcated with

these sustainability dispositions and practices. At these times, the demand for bore water to top up rainwater tanks or to replace contaminated water places enormous stress on the water supply. This stress routinely extends beyond breaking point into water shortages, which forces members of the local community to pay in unacceptable ways for the lifestyles and interests of others. There is genuine fear that new housing will generate conditions of permanent water stress.

While water supply presents a challenge in itself, the disposal of wastewater adds further complications and brings with it health and environmental concerns (Issues and Options, Hauraki Gulf Islands review, Auckland City Council 2015). Traditionally, most properties on Waiheke have relied on independent on-site wastewater treatment (septic tank pre-treatment units and effluent soakage fields) for both grey and black water. The treatment of sewage generally involves the separation of the liquid and solid fractions of the wastes. Solids are applied to land under discharge permits issued by the Council. On-site treatment can be hampered by the ability to obtain adequate soakage (not available on steep terrain and soils with poor infiltration characteristics, such as clay), while intensive subdivision and development patterns tax the ability of soakage fields to cope with seepage from neighbouring properties. Geological variability, adverse groundwater conditions in some areas, variable topography, the presence of dense bush cover, differential stability of soils and the proximity of disposal fields to watercourses (in some areas) all add further complications (Tonkin & Taylor Ltd 1990). This variability is then overlain with different lot sizes and variable housing densities.

Alternatives to septic tanks have been developed, notably Aerated Wastewater Treatment Systems. These systems use secondary treatment of liquid effluent that can be irrigated through drippers, usually beneath soil or gravel. They require less land area than traditional septic tanks, allowing for smaller sections and more compact housing, while tree cover is not necessary. While current bylaws specify maximum levels of built coverage to ensure sufficient land area for the dispersal of liquid effluent, longer-settled parts of the

island (e.g. near Little Oneroa Stream) with smaller lot sizes have recently experienced extensive pollution of groundwater and streams. Aerated wastewater systems are now mandatory for resource consent for new dwellings, and all existing and future development must be capable of satisfactory treatment and disposal of wastewater on-site. While the majority of residences and commercial premises continue to rely on individual on-site wastewater treatment and disposal systems, the Owhanake wastewater treatment plant constructed in 2001 between Matiatia and Oneroa treats wastewater from the commercial area of Oneroa and the Matiatia Wharf. It connects around 40 properties but is dependent on the regular maintenance of the Oneroa commercial area's septic tanks and is struggling to cope with recent growth in wastewater.

Development interests and commentators beyond the island commonly see reticulated water and wastewater treatment infrastructure as the solution. However, Auckland City Council (2016) supports the idea of a reticulation-free island (apart from that area already zoned for reticulation in Oneroa). It sees this as a feature of Waiheke's special character and a competitive advantage in attracting sustainable development. Among its ideal scenarios for infrastructure and services, it lists 'a local waste-management programme that includes 'on-site wastewater treatment and disposal', and care for and maintenance of individual systems'. Again, these contradictory positions are being advocated and contested in Waiheke's highly politicised communities.

## Conclusion

This Research Note highlights the high level of political engagement of the Waiheke community with its culture of political and environmental activism. The foregoing story constitutes a response to living in a distinctive island place that is being drawn into ever-tighter networks with the city of which it is (to some, reluctantly) a part. Influenced by its (exceptional) island character, proposed development initiatives are met with close scrutiny and intense political contest. On-going conflicts over development reflect the competing

future imaginaries of 'alternative life-stylers', conservationists, pro-modernists, anti-modernists and *mana whenua*. Conflicts are mediated by thick layers of community institutions, from 'EW' to an active and cherished tradition of community hall meetings, the writing of public submissions and periodic legal challenges. There is much to be speculated about with respect to the material outcomes of development and the possible constraints that might (or should) be imposed on it (e.g., regulation of visitor numbers, securing the RUB and/or preventing reticulation). The contribution of this Research Note is to point to the possibilities that still lie in effective community action. In particular, EW has been highlighted as an exemplar of how direct community interest and concern might be harnessed to generate progressive, community-led outcomes and incorporated into local governance regimes. Meanwhile, a local group, 'Our Waiheke', lodged a petition in August 2016 for the island to de-amalgamate from the Auckland Council and to have its own council. Public consultations about this petition are underway as this report is written, suggesting that the politics of island life help reproduce the character of Waiheke as an island of contentment expressed through discontent.

## Endnote

- 1 'Lonely Planet' rated Waiheke the fifth best destination in the world to visit in 2016.

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