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Opinion: Yes, let's not forget what councils really do

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As we head into local government elections, it's worth remembering what councils really do — and why their role in our communities matters so much.

While the formal inclusion of the four wellbeings — social, economic, environmental, and cultural — is relatively recent, councils have long been about more than just roads, pipes, and rubbish.

That broader holistic and people-centred mandate — the four wellbeings — is now on the chopping block. But whether they remain in legislation or not, they still matter. Because they reflect what makes a community a great place to live, play, work, visit, and spend time together.

Things like safe streets — for children and elderly alike. Clean drinking water. Vibrant and accessible public spaces that connect and calm us. Places where culture is celebrated, the environment is protected, and the future is planned for — not just reacted to.

These things don't just appear. And they certainly don't come cheap.


Here's the truth: the communities we've enjoyed — the Whakatāne that we love — were built by generations past who thought long-term. Who planned. Who paid. Who made hard decisions with future generations in mind.

We haven't done that for decades now.

For too long, we've allowed councils to keep rates artificially low to win short-term popularity and secure ongoing political power. It felt better for our personal bank balances — and we still got to enjoy the assets that had already been built with us in mind. But ultimately, it left us with ageing pipes, crumbling infrastructure, and rising costs — all while our community kept growing.

Now the bill has landed. We're frustrated — and no one wants to pay.

But doing nothing is also no longer an option.



Yes, we see candidates railing against rates increases — and yes, they are painful in this cost-of-living crisis. We're constantly fed the narrative, from central government too, that we need leaders who can run society and communities like a household budget. That we can't afford things we want and enjoy. That debt is dangerous. And it certainly can be.

For households. But this isn't a household. It's local government.

And equally — or perhaps ethically — we can't afford to keep borrowing comfort from the future either. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are creating debt. Delayed investment is a cost — and it's compounding.

Yes, life is expensive. Yes, balance is important now. But so is accountability — to each other, to our children, and to those who'll inherit what we leave behind.

So, as we head to the polls, let's vote with that in mind. Let's not just look to candidates who brazenly promise to keep things cheap for us personally. Let's ask who will keep things working but also growing.

Let's demand courage. Vision. Long-term thinking. A mayor and councillors who are eager to work together for all of us — motivated not just by managing the now, but by building a strong foundation for the future.

Let's be honest about the challenges, and clear-eyed about the kind of community we want to be. Let's vote for leaders who can hold this nuance — honestly, logically, and compassionately.

Because ultimately, the four wellbeings weren't just policy. They were a reminder of what really matters.

And whether they stay in law, they must stay in our decisions.

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