



George Wood

George has seen a lot of change on the North Shore, having first worked there with the New Zealand Police, then as North Shore City mayor and now as an Auckland City councillor. He has witnessed a *'pioneering spirit'* of community building from the grassroots, not-for-profit organisations that he describes as the Shore's *'social enhancement organisations'*. During his mayoralty, George was able to recognise the work of many such organisations by awarding annual civic awards for services to the community.

George has always believed that, with help, people can achieve their goals, and uses this example to explain: *Instead of buying the cheapest car on the lot, give them an idea and some pointers that there's a different way to do it, save some money and obtain a far more reliable car that works out cheaper in the long run.*

Born in Birkenhead in 1946, the eldest of three children, George remembers having had a great childhood in Beach Haven, in a very *close-knit community where everybody knew everybody and their business. We didn't have a lot but we certainly had a pretty good way of life in that area in those days.* His family has had a long connection to the area, going back to his great-grandparents. His father worked for Birkenhead Transport as a bus driver after he returned from overseas service in the Second World War, before starting up his own carrying business.

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George attended Birkdale Primary School, Northcote Intermediate and Northcote College, but does not feel that he applied himself terribly well at school. After playing rugby for Northcote club as a junior in 1957, he found something he was good at and this became a big part of his life. *I've been involved with the Northcote-Birkenhead rugby club on and off ever since.*

His involvement in local body politics started vicariously, after his father stood for the Birkenhead Borough Council in 1959, and topped the poll. George doesn't know why his father stood for the Council except for the fact his close friend, Cyril Crocombe, was already on the Council, and became the mayor. *They got elected in 1959. It was just after the Harbour Bridge opened, development was just going gangbusters right through that area because it became a residential area for*



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Auckland city. People were able to buy homes over there, all the orchards and market gardens were subdivided and sold off; people who owned them were able to realise a good return on their land. Sold them for development, and development went crazy. The Borough Council borrowed money to upgrade all the roads and put in a sewerage system.

After he left school at the end of 1965, George eventually joined the New Zealand Police and trained in Wellington. He returned to Auckland as a constable in 1966 and he spent a year patrolling Queen Street and the inner city. In 1967, he was posted to Newton police station, and in late 1968, decided to commence training to become a detective, a role he really enjoyed.

George married Myra in 1972, and the couple moved to Rotorua where he had greater responsibility and investigated some interesting criminal cases. They returned to Auckland in 1976 when George was promoted to the rank of detective senior sergeant. By 1978 he was a detective inspector. In 1980, George was appointed CIB region coordinator at Palmerston North working in the west coast of the North Island between Levin and New Plymouth. This involved considerable travel and working with local detectives in the investigation of serious crime.

He returned to Auckland in 1989, had various roles including managing the police fraud squad for around three years. He moved across the Waitemata to become the North Shore area commander in 1995. It was during this period that he says he made some decisions that ultimately led to him leaving the police force and standing for the North Shore mayoralty. He had attended a course at the Australian Institute of Police Management in Sydney which covered changes in policing style, and was intrigued by the so-called 'broken windows' policing initiative. *If you work on the small things and actively investigate matters, it's more preventative and has a major impact on communities and community well-being. When people feel it's safe to go out on the street, and that they're going to take back the street from the hoodlums and criminals, it's just*



George in uniform, 27th June 1998 © John Selkirk – photographer

amazing how things do change. He returned after the course 'really itching' to make some changes to policing on the Shore.

George was determined to introduce some sort of 'broken windows' initiative, especially in Northcote central where there were problems with thieving, illegal drug use, graffiti and vandalism. While he realised that working with people in the area was important in order for them to reclaim their community, he felt there was no support from North Shore City Council for his ideas. *They weren't into looking at how they could improve their local communities to make things better—how people's lives could be bettered.* And so, in 1998, a year after he'd been to the

North Shore City Council
2004 – 2007



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BACK Row: Callum Blair, Chris Darby, Bob Mitchell, Gary Holmes and Mike Tafua

MIDDLE Row: Tony Holman, Andrew Eaglen, Kevin Schwass, Ivan Dunn, Peter White and Tony Barker

FRONT Row: Julia Parfitt, Dianne Hale, (Deputy Mayor), George Wood (Mayor), Heather Brown and Margaret Miles

course in Sydney, George decided to stand for the mayoralty. His family, while supportive, doubted that he would out-poll the other seasoned North Shore politicians he was up against in the contest.

George recalled his first public meeting along with the other mayoral candidates. He came prepared with a written speech and thought that he had delivered it well. Others agreed and friends began to help with his campaign, including offering the advice that it would be a good idea if he developed some social policies, and so he did. *The big issue on the Shore at that time was the fact that the beach water was impaired by the overflows in the sewage system; Devonport, Takapuna, right up the Bays, everywhere, there was overflows happening. So I made this big promise that I would clean it up. I also was strongly supportive of fostering the development of business growth to provide local jobs for our people, especially the younger ones.*

On election night, before the official results were announced, Myra got a telephone call, *'We understand that George is going to be the mayor'*, and this turned out to be correct. *I must say that I then thought, What have I done?*

George's top priority as mayor was to develop a strategic plan for the North Shore. He felt that the main issue for those who lived there was maintaining and enhancing the natural environment, which he still thinks is the most important priority. He also pursued his idea to encourage new businesses to come to the Shore.

He had not forgotten Northcote and his 'broken windows' policing ideas, and so North Shore City Council advisors spent a lot of time working with police and the community to improve the area. George was a hands-on mayor and worked closely with the police on this initiative. He had a great ally in Jill Nerheny of the Birkenhead Northcote Community Facilities Trust.

One significant infrastructural development on the North Shore, supported by Council and government agencies, was the Northern Busway public transport development. George is proud of this achievement which he feels came about because of

the good relations he developed with Government ministers and local members of Parliament during his two terms as chair of the Auckland mayoral forum.

In 2004, the Helen Clark Labour-led Government made a commitment over ten-years (2004 – 2014) of 1.62 billion dollars to Auckland's transport, over and above money that the area was getting from petrol tax and road user charges. The mayoral forum lobbied for this investment and was pleased that central government agreed to work in partnership with them to determine what the needs of Auckland transport were and how it could be funded.

That funding contributed to development of the Northern Busway, Spaghetti Junction improvement, the rebuilding of the Newmarket viaduct, State Highway 20 across south and west Auckland, a new bridge at Mangere, and the duplication of the Greenhithe Bridge. *So I was pretty happy about what happened and what we achieved at that time, and I'd say that it was a time when Auckland had a very good relationship with the government in Wellington.* The mayoral forum was an important conduit between Auckland and central government in Wellington, in the lead up to the eventual amalgamation of the city's councils.

In 2006 George supported a proposed change in the organisational structure of local government across Auckland. He had attended a meeting of the Committee for Auckland and, as a result, became part of a group to study how this might happen. When George took the idea to his council, he found that the councillors were most unimpressed with the idea—and with George. He thinks it was because they were afraid of *losing the Shore's identity.*

In 2007, George lost the mayoral election and Andrew Williams became the mayor. George was the only North Shore City mayor who served for three consecutive terms but admits that, whilst he had a great deal of support, he *wasn't everybody's cup of tea. I did put the rates up quite a lot when I was the mayor but I've*

always had a reason why it was happening and I think people bought into those reasons. George was appointed a CNZM, Companion to the New Zealand Order of Merit, in 2008 for services to local body affairs.

A Royal Commission was set up by the Labour Government in 2008 to examine Auckland's local governance. This Commission examined proposals for a new structure of local government for Auckland and received submissions from the public. George set about working with Wyn Hoadley (ex-mayor of Takapuna City Council, 1986–1989) to write a submission to the Royal Commission supporting the idea of change. Rodney Hide (former ACT Party leader and MP) was charged with implementing the recommendations on behalf of the National Government. *I have real concerns about the type of structure that was set up but at the end of the day it is Aucklanders who must make it work.*

After the new Auckland Council was established in 2010, George stood for and was elected one of two councillors for the North Shore Ward (the other being Ann Hartley in the first term and Chris Darby the second). He was given responsibility for looking after the Council's community safety forum, a position he has relished. In his first speech as a city councillor, George made a strong plea to the new council that it *actively tries to improve social conditions in the city and to ensure that fewer young people ended up in jail.*

George says that he is a great supporter of the Auckland Council which he thinks has enabled planning across the area to be streamlined and sensible. *Auckland has got great potential as a major centre in the southwest Pacific and I think we've got the ability now to compete with places like Sydney and Brisbane and Melbourne, whereas before we were just a little backwater.*

George is very enthusiastic about the Council's Southern Initiative—a project which will look at the well-being of people

living in Papakura, Manurewa, Otara, Papatoetoe, Mangere, and Otahuhu. The Initiative will concentrate on areas such as education and housing—*people live in appalling conditions—garages, and cars. We just don't understand what it's like.* George argues that Auckland Council should be involved because it represents the community, and therefore should have a strong leadership role in lobbying government agencies about where government funding is spent in that community. George is pleasantly surprised at what has been achieved in the first five years of the new Council.

The bottom line is always, in my view, giving people jobs because if people have a job and they get money and it's their money, they are on the ladder upwards. But to get a job, it's not easy. You go to the libraries in places like Manurewa and Clendon, say, during the day, [and] you will see people in there, men who are looking for jobs filling out applications, trying to get a job. It's an unbelievable kind of indictment on our current 'them and us' society. Makes me very sad when I see and hear how difficult it is for some people to live their lives these days. It's sad and I don't mind saying I've shed a tear when one hears of the tragic difficulties some people face in life. It's very sad.

Now in his second term as councillor for the North Shore ward, George is also chair of the Regional Strategy and Policy Committee. Most Council policies are worked on by the committee; for example, the controversial decision whether to use 1080 to eradicate possums in the Hunua Ranges.

Reflecting back to the concerns of the North Shore community when he was first elected mayor, George is still a firm believer that *good urban design and planning* through community consultation is essential if greater Auckland is to complement its development and growth with its beautiful natural environment.

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Opposite page: George at Cadness Reserve in Cadness Street, Northcote Central, with local young people, 1997

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