



We have no heritage buildings. But we have got regional parks;  
that is really our heritage, and the beautiful pohutukawas.

# Jan O'Connor

Jan has had a long involvement in local body politics starting with her early community activism for better facilities. Jan has worked hard for the North Shore as local body politician, on community and local board, and as a councillor since the mid-1980s, for both Takapuna City and North Shore City. She relishes the opportunity for hands-on participation in issues such as transport and planning, but above all, her passion is for preserving open spaces, parks and reserves on the North Shore.

Having moved to the North Shore in the mid-1960s, Jan has been a local body politician on community and local boards and as a councillor since 1986 for both Takapuna City and North Shore City. She relishes the opportunity for hands-on participation in issues such as transport and planning, but above all, her passion is for preserving open spaces, parks and reserves on the North Shore.

Jan was born in Wellington but, when she was a baby, her family moved to Auckland, living in Harbour View Road, Point Chevalier. Jan is the third of four children—she has two sisters and a brother. She says that she was a *sby, quiet child*. Jan played tennis, was a Girl Guide, loved cycling and basketball. Her father, Bill Heffernan, was a lawyer and her mother, Thora, started work when Jan was 12, as a secretary in a Queen Street real estate firm and later with the Ranfurly Home. Jan hated her mother not being there when she came home from school.

*My brother was a dental student in Dunedin, with no bursary and before student loans. The fees were as enormous then as they*

*are today. I looked after my six-year-old sister and cooked the family dinner every night.*

Tom and Doris Pearce became close family friends. Their eldest daughter, Helen, is still Jan's closest friend. They introduced Jan's family to Piha. Her love of the place has lasted all these years. *When I was five we first went out to Piha. We tented on the camping ground (which is still there) and rented before we bought our section which had a right-of-way to the beach. We had a lovely time. Tom Pearce, firstly an Auckland City Councillor before he became elected to the Auckland Regional Authority, was probably the only local government politician I ever met.* In those days before the ward system, there little representation from the Western areas. Tom, as chair of the then Auckland Regional Authority (ARA), was the instigator of buying the first lot of regional parks, including Wenderholm. Jan has had a love of regional parks and open spaces since then. *I think when you have been overseas and you come back, you think, 'We have got no heritage buildings.'*

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Her father helped start the Point Chevalier Rugby Club in a predominately rugby league area. He later became the liaison officer for the Auckland Rugby Union. *He used to look after the Ranfurly Shield, so he had to bring it home and he'd put it under my bed for safe keeping.*

Jan worked for eight years at the Land Transfer Office (now Land Information New Zealand) after she left school. *That is where I got my love of historic detail [for land].* She then travelled to Sydney where she worked in a solicitor's office for 12 months and met her husband, John, there. She really enjoyed working in Sydney, but knew that she did not want to live there permanently, so the couple returned to New Zealand to marry, and they settled in Castor Bay on Auckland's North Shore. Jan decided she wanted to have her three children quickly. When her youngest was two years of age, she joined Toastmistress (the women's Toastmasters Club). It was a lively group which met at the Mon Desir Hotel in Takapuna. In 1975 she was elected as the vice president for New Zealand. But her road travelling to Dargaville and Tauranga resulted in two head-on crashes, one as a result of a driver drunk at 4.00 p.m., and the second landing her in Middlemore Hospital for some weeks—the driver of the other car was found to be carrying a boot load of marijuana.

The Toastmistress experience developed Jan's confidence in public speaking and helped change her attitude about speaking at public meetings. It also provided her with an early taste of feminism, which then encouraged her to go and hear Germaine Greer speak at a crowded Auckland Town Hall in 1972.

Jan's first involvement in community activism came after she began part-time work with Turner Hopkins in Takapuna. When

the all-day parking fee at the Central car park was increased to \$19 per day, she started a group called the Takapuna Car Park Action Group and began circulating a petition calling for more long-term parking in Takapuna. She throws her hands up in despair that land that had been bought for a long-term public car park in 1983 still has not been developed. Currently she is trying to save the Central car park from being developed into apartments and retail. This land was paid for by local retailers over 25 years. Over five Sundays, more than 3,300 people petitioned that this land, which is the home of the Sunday Market, not be sold. Jan's vision is that it become an Aotea Square with two levels of parking. Mayor Robbie's visionary council achieved that in the 1970s—and nearly 50 years on, open space is even more important.

Jan is a great supporter of keeping existing open spaces as parks and reserves, and recalls writing to the Takapuna City Council in the mid-70s opposing an initiative to build a children's crèche on Potters Park in Anzac Street. She searched the original grant at the Land Transfer Office and found that the park had been given by Frederick Seymour Potter, coachbuilder from Mt Eden, on the condition that 'no buildings were put on it'. *I never had an acknowledgement of that from the Council, but it was probably was my first start in local government, keeping reserves as open spaces!*

While Jan had only been on the periphery of local politics in Takapuna, she had been a member of the Piha Ratepayers and Residents Association for many years, where the family had built their bach. She was made secretary of the local association and took the role seriously. I went to a course run by Graham Bush at Auckland University on how to become a local government candidate, only because I wanted to be a good secretary. She later attended a YMCA course and listened to women who were already in local government, including Dame Catherine Tizard, mayor

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of Auckland; Pat Chapman, Rodney and Helensville representative on the Auckland Regional Authority (ARA); and Jean Sampson, mayor of Northcote. The courses were intended to inspire and encourage women in the community to think about standing for local government, including places on the Regional Council and the Harbour Board.

Jan became interested in Waitemata City local politics and was a supporter of Mayor Tim Shadbolt. In 1986, she stood as an independent for the Waitemata City Council as well as for the Takapuna City Council, and although she campaigned more for the Waitemata position, she was elected in Takapuna. Tim's Team that year took a clean sweep.

Jan had decided to stand in the local body elections for a seat on Takapuna City Council after seeing an advertisement in the local paper asking for candidates to stand on Wyn Hoadley's ticket. The other new face on the team was Genevieve Becroft. Jan and Genevieve were elected, as was Wyn as mayor. *We had a really good council. Wyn was a very good mayor, very diplomatic, and we had a very well-run council, certainly not as political as the Waitemata Council.*

During Wyn Hoadley's mayoralty, the Council built the new Takapuna Library on The Strand, planned the building of the Rose Centre in Belmont, and bought the land where the Bruce Mason Theatre stands today. *We achieved quite a lot. Council appointed me to the former Waitemata Power Board where I remained for some years.*

*When the next election came [in 1989], Wyn was working really hard as mayor on hearings for the new Takapuna District Plan. Ann Hartley was elected mayor in the 1989 elections on the newly amalgamated North Shore City Council. Jan kept her seat, as did Genevieve. She feels that... we [Genevieve and I] were the only two councillors on the new North Shore City Council who had Takapuna's best interests at heart.*

She recalls that it was a tense time, as there were factions in the new council, which was dominated by Team North Harbour councillors. *Northcote and Birkenhead sort of ganged up on Takapuna. Former Takapuna City Council rates rose as high as 20% to match the high Birkenhead rates. Jan helped organise a petition against the loan poll, which was not a decision greeted favourably by the mayor. They needed to*



*Jan O'Connor, circa 1990s*

*borrow about \$3 million to do all this community development.* As a result, the community development initiative was cut back. *It was not a happy time.* After a long marriage, Jan's husband decided to return to Australia. She was not re-elected at the 1992 elections.

At the 1995 elections, having shifted to Hauraki and supported by her new partner, Michael Murphy, Jan decided to stand for the Auckland Regional Council (ARC) as she felt strongly about the need for better Takapuna bus services. Working in the city, she couldn't believe that buses sat in Esmonde Road gridlocked for up to 30 minutes in the morning peak. Jan was not elected, Jenny Hoadley and Philip Sherry being the two successful ARC members for the whole of the North Shore. Undaunted she petitioned the ARC for better services and North Shore Council for a bus lane. After ten years this lane was completed and it now takes just 13 minutes to cross the Bridge.

In 1998, Jan stood for mayor. *I thought if I stood for mayor with the resulting publicity I might get back on Council.* She had an innovative publicity campaign which included a plane flying a banner asking for votes on a Saturday morning and at the same time travelling around the Shore with friends in a bus festooned with balloons. *I always chose pink for my campaigns. That has always been my colour. Not many men will choose pink.* She was not elected mayor or a councillor, but did get the highest votes for the Takapuna Community Board.

In 2007, she made it back onto North Shore City Council as an independent when Andrew Williams became mayor. It was a time when the Royal Commission on Auckland Governance was established to look at ways of establishing one city council for the greater Auckland area. North Shore did not support a single city council. Jan believes the re-structuring should have been for a stronger, more powerful regional council. She compares that with the Australian state system, where the state government takes responsibility for infrastructure but local government is still done at a city council level. To Jan, the current Auckland Council model

is too large and very daunting. She fears that the regional parks especially could become the sacrificial lambs without the former ARC. Furthermore, says Jan, local communities have lost any powers over roading, transport and footpaths, and this is where most resident complaints come from.

Today, as a two-term councillor, three-term member of the former Takapuna Community Board, and now second-term member of the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board, Jan says that she always tries to listen to public opinion and is prepared to change her position on an issue. She uses the example of the debate over the future of the Takapuna camping ground. During George Wood's mayoralty, when the lease for the camping ground site was being renewed, Jan gained more than 1,000 signatures on a petition to close the camping ground and allow it to revert to an open space. As a result, when the lease was renewed it was for a smaller area of land, with a park in front of the beachfront café. The public fell in love with it. *Now everybody loves the camping ground. Public opinion has changed. Right now a camping ground is what people want and that is where I come from.*

When Jan was elected to the new Devonport-Takapuna Local Board in 2010, she found the new structure difficult to come to terms with, especially the loss of ability to have any meaningful say in planning decisions. *I am very disappointed in the way that we are trying to intensify too quickly. I would sooner see satellite towns, as in London. You have a good train service and live in a smaller town with a back and front yard—the way we were all brought up. People migrated to New Zealand for such a way of living rather than trying to squash families into apartments.*

Her time as a local government politician has introduced Jan to many community organisations and she is constantly amazed at the high number of volunteers. Although her focus has been on transport, Jan feels strongly about the need for space for recreation, outdoor sport, events and to provide ambience. Much of the parkland in Takapuna's older subdivisions is accessible only

down right-of-ways, and so is often unseen and unused by the general public. *These should be assets for the whole community, not just those who live around them,* says Jan.

What she cannot support, however, is building permanent structures in parks. *I supported a group of architects in Devonport that wanted to rebuild the library anywhere, but not on the park. We have a beautiful library, but a lost opportunity to re-open up Windsor Reserve and have that lovely view. The new library on the Reserve does look lovely, but once you get that first building on a reserve, they never ever clear that space as an open park. As night follows day, it happens all the time on every reserve.* One of the reasons people supported the Takapuna camping ground is that they did not want permanent buildings on the reserve land.

Jan keeps an eye on initiatives where land could be purchased, such as the site of the former Takapuna Fire Station adjoining the Killarney Reserve, which would open Lake Pupuke up to the road. *As a Board we should have made a stronger stand. Mayor Williams and previous Council tried very hard to buy it but the Fire Service were not ready to sell it. There will be a very large high[-rise] development built there. No Takapuna park land has been bought since this [current] Council has been in, to compensate for the planned intensification where another 10,000 people are expected to be accommodated in the next 10 to 15 years.*

She realises that providing good and frequent public transport is essential if her idea of satellite towns is to be successful: *It would be possible to commute from Pokeno and Ngaruawahia to Auckland with a good train service.* She acknowledges that it is more difficult for the North Shore, though, and believes the expansion of the Busway is essential. *But it is a shame that we are allowing all this intensification and we are just relying on roading. I have lobbied for better bus services and open spaces. It is all part of the jigsaw.*

