

feature

Port restoration

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SAVING ONEHUNGA'S PORT

Manukau Harbour's Port of Onehunga is an uninspiring, mud-infested wasteland. It wasn't always so. Jim Jackson, chairman of the Manukau Harbour Restoration Society, is determined to see it resuscitated. He spoke to Lawrence Schäffler.



BNZ What's caused the port's degradation?

JJ Many things, and some began decades ago. It started with a major reclamation project – 600 acres of the upper Manukau Harbour in the 1950s. Sadly, domestic rubbish was used as part of the fill. To this day the decomposition continues to generate methane gas. In those days bunding wasn't used, so we also have a serious leachate problem. This fluid leaks into the harbour – and its toxicity is unknown.

This was compounded by the upper harbour being used as a rubbish tip. I grew up in the area and Auckland Harbour Board, Onehunga and One Tree Hill Borough Councils all operated rubbish tips along the harbour foreshore. It was quite normal to dump rubbish directly into the harbour.

Unsuitable fill and domestic rubbish have displaced tonnes of mud and silt – and over decades of strong tidal flows this has compromised the water depth around the port. The sedimentation problem's so bad fishing boats cannot use the basin as they go aground at low tide. When I was a child we sailed here. Today it's silted up.

BNZ The harbour's also been home to the Mangere sewage works for around half a century. Has this had an impact?

JJ Definitely, and there are two different problems. First, there are sewer overflow pipes which during heavy downpours discharge directly into the harbour because Auckland Council's stormwater infrastructure hasn't been separated from the sewer system.

It's so bad that Watercare insisted we remove a sandy beach and replace it with rocks to prevent people using it because of the overflows. Auckland Council should be spending money on stormwater and sewage separation at source. Watercare's sewer network works fine in normal conditions.

ABOVE
The port in happier times – 1955.

LEFT
Jim Jackson is adamant the mud-infested port can be resuscitated.

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LEFT The floating dock would go right here – there's plenty of space.

MAIN IMAGE A number of derelict vessels are at home in the mud.

RIGHT There are a number of boat ramps, but they're all tidal and have restricted use at low tide.



Fifty years ago you'd find 30 or 40 recreational vessels moored here. Today there are none.

Secondly, Watercare's Mangere treatment plant releases the equivalent of 20,000 10-tonne truck loads of treated wastewater into the harbour every day. And while one could argue that this is OK because it's treated, it's been discharging at Puketutu Island for over 50 years and it's apparent that freshwater is affecting the natural salinity of the seawater.

We're told the tidal movement takes 12 days to shift the water from the Puketutu outlet to the Tasman Sea. So it's in the harbour for quite a while, certainly long enough to dilute the composition of the seawater.

BNZ Do you have a sense how this has affected marine life?

JJ Well consider this. In 2009 the then Auckland Regional Council commissioned NIWA to prepare a report looking at the Manukau Harbour's fish stocks. It found that the harbour provides just two percent of juvenile snapper to the West coast snapper fishery, whereas the Kaipara Harbour provides ninety-eight percent. Of course, the Kaipara is substantially larger – but the Manukau is the country's second largest harbour – and the discrepancy suggests something is radically wrong.

I believe marine life has been compromised and has moved away. For example, the crabs which have enjoyed a strong saltwater environment for thousands of years have disappeared – could this be why various bird species no longer feed in these areas? We also have a major problem with mud oysters. They



are an invasive species – very sharp and lethal. They weren't here when I was a kid. A greater concentration of freshwater – together with the mud – has changed the ecology.

BNZ You believe there are also cultural and heritage issues which need addressing?

JJ In its day Onehunga was a viable, dynamic port. It was a strong trading facility with a substantial fishing industry. But it was also a vibrant recreational boating area. Fifty years ago you'd find 30 or 40 vessels recreational vessels moored here. Today there are none. With all the silt it's too shallow and the environment is hardly appealing. And as the local iwi regularly reiterate, there is a legitimate gripe about the water quality.

BNZ So how do we fix this? What are you proposing?

JJ There's no magical silver bullet. The first step is to educate our politicians and senior council officers by taking them out on the harbour and showing them that once you depart the Port of Onehunga, the outer harbour has many redeeming features.

The change process must be addressed on multiple fronts. I'd like to see the establishment of an agency to better manage the harbour. An agency which can make decisions, which has a funding stream and which works with iwi and the harbour's key stakeholders.

This high-level approach will, I believe, start a long overdue change process on a range of matters – improving fish stocks, better fishery management, sediment management, better navigational markers, public jetties, functional boat ramps where trailer boats can be launched and retrieved, a series of public mooring buoys placed around the greater harbour and, here at the Port of Onehunga, a floating pontoon for mooring vessels.

These are the key elements to any harbour and will facilitate the establishment of a ferry service running between the port and places such as the Awhitu Peninsula, Cornwallis and Clark's Beach.

BNZ Hang on – the Manukau already has quite a few public boat ramps.

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JJ Yes, but they're all tidal and that severely limits boating activity. We need ramps that function 24/7.

BNZ To give the recreational movement some impetus, you're offering to install moorings – at your own cost – around the greater Manukau Harbour? That sounds like a relatively straightforward project?

JJ Actually, it's anything but. Just to submit the application for the moorings will cost \$3,500. And I'm happy to fund that – and even pay for the installation of the moorings – rather than wait for Council to fund it. But the process should be streamlined by Council, in ways which I would describe as being business- and community-friendly. I'd have thought the provision of moorings would be party of the Unitary Plan? It shouldn't have to fall to private individuals.

BNZ You say the port and the harbour would benefit from a ferry operation. What do you mean?

JJ I envisage a ferry operation between the Port and centres around the harbour – it's much easier than driving around the area by road – and it's definitely a lot cheaper than building roads.

BNZ Given the port's silting problem, you want to build a floating dock here?



JJ Correct. I'd like to build a floating marina berth in deep water, suitable for a 24/7 operation. With a jetty to facilitate the safe transfer of people onto a vessel to show them around the harbour.

It could also facilitate the establishment of a Coastguard station at the Port to support the other stations around the harbour at Papakura, French Bay and Waiuku. The main population base – and good hospitals – is here at Onehunga. It could also trigger tourism opportunities, providing visitors with an overview of the area's early history and the harbour's marine life.

BNZ Is there space for this floating dock?

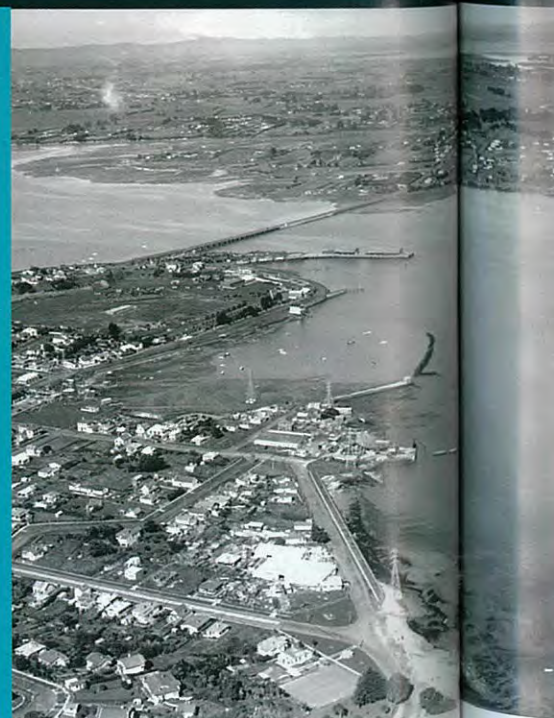
JJ More than enough. Pacifica Shipping and Holcim Cement vessels no longer call at the port. So most of the infrastructure is already here – it would be quite easy to modify it and make it more user-friendly for recreational boats. I see the floating dock as the catalyst to start the change process.



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Orpheus Drive runs along the Onehunga Port's foreshore. It's named after the HMS Orpheus, a 1706-tonne steam corvette that was wrecked trying to cross the Manukau bar in 1863. Of the 259 men aboard, 189 died. It remains New Zealand's worst maritime disaster.



BNZ A dock is one part of your vision – you say there are other redevelopment opportunities?

JJ To provide the required community 'lift' we also need to develop the surrounding area. I'd like to see the port become a base for the education of people associated with the marine industry.

There could be classes for fishing boats skippers, for example, or a navigation school, or a composite boatbuilding centre. There are many opportunities with diverse benefits. It's a long-term process, but as a starting point, by demonstrating that boating is a viable and appealing activity, we can rekindle the area. I believe the port is the key to wide-scale change.

BNZ Where do things stand today?

JJ We have a complex situation with multiple players and interests – and it's difficult to discern any direction. Ports of Auckland owns Port of Onehunga – the rest of the harbour's controlled by Auckland Council.

The biggest uncertainty is the New Zealand Transport Agency's proposed building of a new \$1.8 billion east-west motorway along the port's foreshore – a development which would, in my opinion, further compromise the area's environment.

The Sanford and Moana fishing companies still use the port for their fishing vessels, and I believe their continued presence is beneficial for the redevelopment of the port. It is my understanding that the building of a 300-tonne slipway for servicing the vessels is being considered. I see this as a vote of confidence. For me, moving the fishing fleet from Auckland's Wynyard Quarter to Onehunga Port makes perfect sense – a significant proportion of the catch comes from the Tasman Sea.

As we speak, though, the Environmental Protection Authority is considering around 600 submissions pertaining to NZTA's proposed East West Link. It wants to acquire a large area of land from the port for the motorway. It's impossible to guess how this might play out – but I hope for the best.

BNZ Why are you so passionate about this? What's your motivation?

JJ I grew up here – I have an affinity for this place. I learned to sail here, have fished here and have been across the Manukau bar countless times. I know the area intimately and I love it.

Once you leave the Port and go west the whole environment changes. It's magnificent, relatively unchanged and unmodified. The port deserves to be revived – and with that, I believe, will come a much broader reinvention of the surrounding area. This will benefit not only visitors, but also the local community.

The port is the key to unlocking the harbour. **BNZ**

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