

Port City - Auckland's maritime heritage still lives

There has been a lot of discussion about the location and role of Ports of Auckland on the waterfront, particularly about the real estate potential of and public access to its land.

The debate over a potential waterfront stadium moved from whether a stadium should be fitted into the area to about whether the port company really needs all the land it occupies. This is a reasonable question.

However, one worrying aspect that came out of the controversy was the impression that some Aucklanders seemed dismissive or just unaware of the critical importance of the port to the commercial prosperity of the region.

It may be that in an increasingly urbanized age, the importance of merchant shipping and importing and exporting of cargo. There have been scathing comments about imported cars on the wharves – ironic given the popularity of Japanese SUVs. It is almost as if there is a feeling that, as with motor vehicles, the imported goods that fill our shopping malls somehow should just materialize onto the supermarket shelves.

This seems to go with a mindset that economic prosperity can be built with ever more cafés and bars. If so we have grown some way from our maritime roots – which for a trading city and an island nation is something of a worry.

Auckland exists because of our merchant seafaring heritage and our port. Auckland grew up around its harbour and port, a process already started when Governor Hobson moved the new colony's capital to Auckland in late 1840.

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By the time the Princes and Kings wharves were completed in 1924 Auckland had become the busiest port in New Zealand. A second port was developed at Onehunga.

In 1940 the Auckland Harbour Board embarked on a 20 year project to build Bledisloe, Jellicoe and Freyberg Wharves. Next was Fergusson Wharf where further extensions continue.

Auckland's superb waterfront, it could be said, extends from Achilles Point near St Heliers some 15km to the Harbour Bridge. But when people talk about the waterfront nowadays they usually mean the 2km from the ferry building east to Mechanics Bay. This short stretch of land contains the working port and is one of New Zealand's economic powerhouses.

Ports of Auckland handles more than \$20 billion of New Zealand's international trade - twice as much as any other New Zealand port. Almost half of New Zealand's total sea trade passes through Auckland (60 per cent of imports and 40 per cent of exports), generating around \$11 billion a year including the flow-on benefits of port operations and trade-related businesses.

According to a recent economic impact assessment, the port supports a third of the Auckland regional economy and contributes 173,000 jobs in the Auckland region alone.

The \$20.5 billion worth of imports and exports handled by Auckland port in the 2005 financial year compares with \$11.1 billion combined value recorded at Auckland International Airport, \$10.6 billion at the Port of Tauranga and \$4.6 billion at Lyttelton. The port is successful because of its close proximity to the country's main population base and markets.

The recent decision by the powerful Maersk Line to direct more of its services through Auckland is a significant indication of how Auckland's Port is rated internationally. But it is not just about cargo; 48 cruise ships visited the city last year – a 50 per cent increase on the previous year – bringing some 100,000 passengers. Each ship's visit adds around \$1 million to the local economy.

With our treasured harbours and the Hauraki Gulf, the Ports of Auckland is an incredibly valuable part of our maritime heritage. And it is 10 per cent owned by the people of the region.

Over the last 15 years since a public outcry narrowly averted an ill-conceived plan to sell the port, the company has contributed around 500 million to the community through an annual dividend to Auckland Regional holdings and its regional predecessors.

Over the next 10 years this funding stream is critical to Auckland Regional Council plans to spend \$1.6 billion on public transport infrastructure and services. It is hard to see how we could contemplate any serious investment in civic infrastructure if we did not own the port.

The red fence on Quay Street is a reminder that the entire Ports of Auckland area is a customs-controlled border, watched for drugs and like. All arriving cargo is also checked to prevent unwanted exotic organisms (such as malarial mosquito larvae, snakes and other pests) entering the country, and every imported car parked on the wharves is passed through the decontamination and cleaning facility at least once, sometimes three or four times.

There are also anti-terrorism security requirements set by the US Coastguard and the US Department for Homeland Security since the 9/11 attacks. These requirements are mandatory for all international ports trading with the United States. Which makes the question of public access to the working port behind the red fence problematic.

That said there is clearly a need for the port to become even more efficient in its use of land.

The ARC group recognises that despite the public's right to access former parts of the working port - Princes Wharf, Hobson Wharf and the Viaduct Harbour - essentially all points west of Queens Wharf - there is an appetite for extending further public access to places like Queens Wharf.

It is not entirely a case of either/or. We believe it is possible to gradually extend public access and still protect the working port.

A review is reassessing the timetable for moving port core operations further east to free up Queens wharf. The new 5ha Fergusson container terminal reclamation is designed to facilitate this eastward shift.

However, the ARC group is well aware that it would be short-sighted to close off options for the “finger wharves” which may come with future changes to shipping technology. These changes could include a renaissance of coastal shipping, very much on the cards as a result of ‘hubbing’ by giant container ships and the ongoing quest for energy-efficient sustainable transport modes.

Looking to the future, wharves like Queens and Captain Cook could be used not only by the growing cruise ship industry but perhaps by new technology high-speed trans-Tasman passenger ships.

In the meantime, ARC/ARH and Auckland City Council really need to speed up the Wynyard Point development with its provisions for a superb headland park, a public building (ideally an art museum) and better public access to this part of the harbour. To facilitate this ARC/ARH and Ports have recently agreed to transfer the 18ha Wynyard Point development land from the port company to ARH. The ARC has also released its draft regional coastal plan changes for the area.

The ARC is also committed to promoting little used parts of the waterfront to which the public already have access rights.

We need to remind Aucklanders that the city and its economy are vitally interconnected with the working port and that Auckland’s maritime heritage is not a museum piece - it still lives and is an important part of what makes Auckland a great Pacific city/region.

**Michael Lee is
Chairman of the Auckland Regional
Council**



Queen Mary cruise ship (Auckland, Feb 2007)