Paper / **Opinion**

UDINZ

Urban Development Institute of New Zealand Incorporated

New Zealand General Election 2026
A Member Voice



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For the 2026 General Election we're asking a range of voices within our UDINZ membership to give us their thoughts on the upcoming election. It can be what they think is important in terms of policies announced and why, their predictions for possible outcomes or advice for an incoming government.

Today's Member Voice has been prepared by Stuart Houghton. Stuart is an urban designer and partner in the Auckland office of Boffa Miskell. Stuart's practice bridges professional and disciplinary divides between planning and design, strategy and implementation, and public and private interests to deliver more liveable urban places. His focus is on helping unlock integrated solutions for complex urban change bringing together development, infrastructure and public realm. He has over 20 years' experience in urban design, landscape architecture and city strategy and policy, including leading roles in developing the Auckland City Centre Masterplan 2012 and the updated 2020 masterplan.

He asks us to lift our sights and look to uplift a much larger tranche of the inner city as an enlarged economic engine and increasingly connected centrepiece for Auckland through a new/renewed long term strategy and vision for Auckland.

Why it's time for a new spatial vision for Auckland

In the short six weeks or so since the opening of the City Rail Link early one morning on a Sunday in September, it has become a cliché to ascribe a new optimism for the city's future to that landmark milestone.

All around, Aucklanders are feeling that we are, slowly but surely, shaking off our sleepy and long-suffering post-Covid malaise, and that positive signs of the city's recovery are really starting to shine through. You only needed to have been standing at the intersection of Pitt Street and Karangahape Road last Saturday evening as thousands came together to mark Halloween to have the palpable reaction that this new way of moving around the city is already starting to fundamentally reshape how we live and how our city functions and feels.

For some time now, there has been an emerging political consensus, across the divide of Parliament and between Wellington and Auckland, that leveraging or making the most of the investment in CRL is essential in this new era of city planning and development that we finally find ourselves in after ten long years of construction.

We have heard it time and again over the last three years. Witness the cascade from Wellington instructing Auckland it must provide for at least 15 storeys at Maungawhau, Kingsland and Morningside rail stations, the resultant changes to Auckland Council's proposed Plan Change 120, and the consolidation of the Maungawhau to Morningside corridor as a "thing", now elevated as a strategic growth area of the highest priority between Council and government, enshrined in the new Auckland City Deal as one of four key strategic priorities (alongside the City Centre, Drury and the Airport).

This sort of fresh thinking, responding to the investment made and seeking to lift up the sights of city planners, is well-reasoned and timely but being made on the fly, and being applied to just one small corridor of the city. It points to a far greater potential, of where we could really start to go if we gave ourselves the permission slip to take a comprehensive fresh look at where we are at across the whole city, what progress we have made, where things are working well organically and where much stronger intervention is needed. The permission even, dare I say it, to envision anew, to come up with new ideas and apply fresh thinking to the future planning of the whole city.

It is time to develop a new spatial vision for the city. The good news is; we need to do it whether we like it not. It has just been mandated by law with the new Planning Act passed into law on 30 September and with a transition period that commenced on 30th October. Now Auckland, like the 16 other regions across the country, will over the coming year or two need to prepare a new Regional Spatial Plan, that will sit above the new Land Use and Natural Environment Plans, and be a key guiding strategic document for the future of the city with a 30 plus year time horizon.

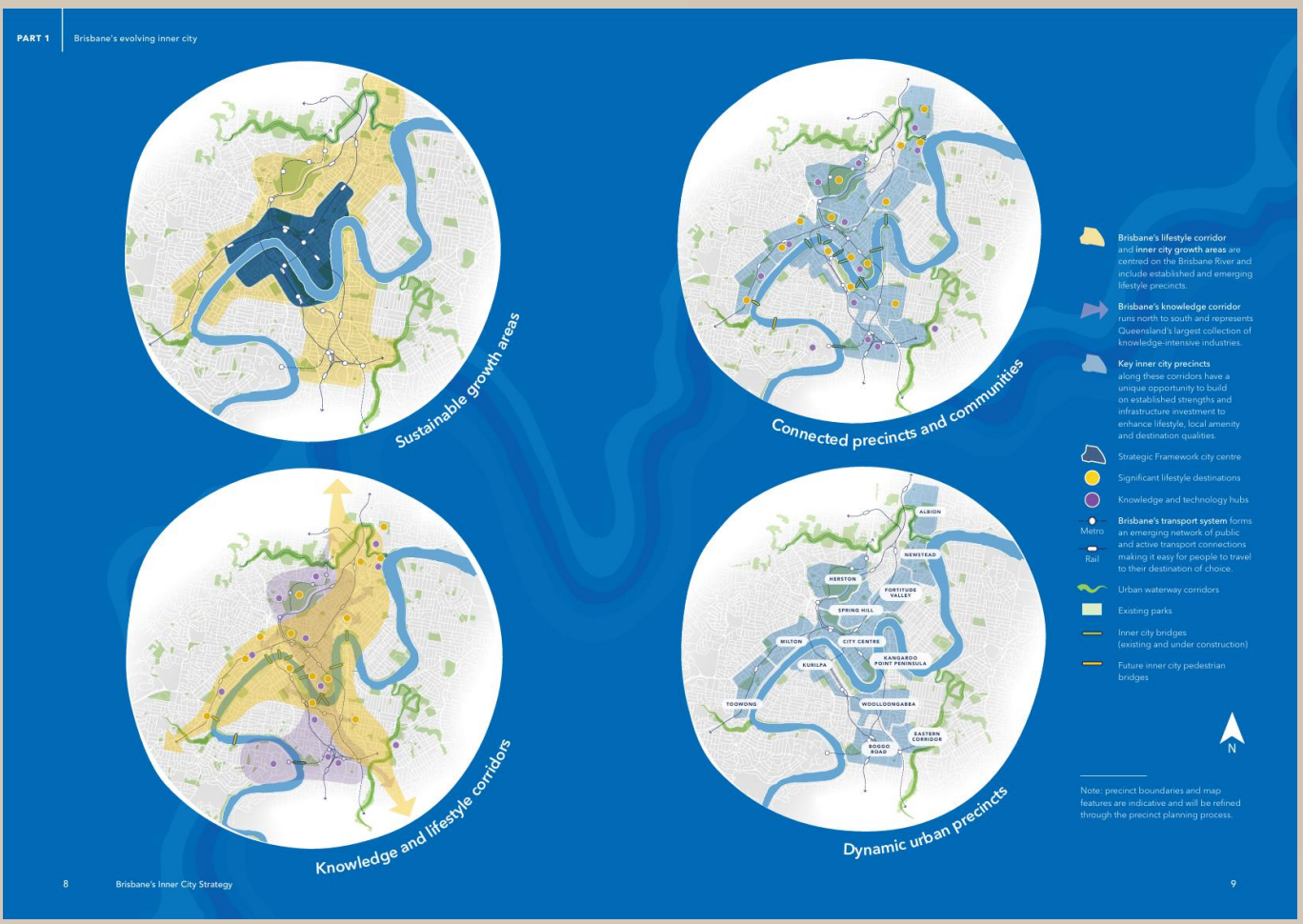
Last week, urban design champion Ludo Campbell-Reid was in town, and reminded a full house at Grimshaw architects of where we have been and what, up until about Covid, felt like the continuous upwards trajectory of our city's urban growth and development. People in the room commented how the Auckland Plan, and the more place-based City Centre Masterplan and Waterfront Plan that dovetailed within that, were important in clearly setting the direction, guiding public sector planning and investment, and giving confidence to the private sector to also invest



To be fair, it's not like city planning is totally standing still. Strong new ideas are starting to come through. The Mayor's recently released manifesto – "Auckland, A City for Two Million" – has a good number beating the drum for a new school in the city centre, and other measures to realise the benefits of growing the city centre residential population to 100,000 residents as Council has been challenged by the City Centre Advisory Panel. The proposal for a new co-ed secondary school at the former Epsom campus being discussed on the campaign trail might be another one. But how do we know? The problem is that so much of this seems quite ad hoc and reactionary and lacking in the joined-up thinking and delivery planning that we have learnt we need to do to truly realise transformational change in any one part of the city.

To take but one small example, we need only look across the ditch to Brisbane, to see where fresh joined-up thinking that is bigger and bolder might lead us. Following the lead of the 2023 spatial plan for South East Queensland, Brisbane doesn't limit themselves to looking to boost the fortunes of a tiny traditional central business district or even an expanded city centre zone, as we currently do. Instead, both city and state recognise and plan for a much greater area of the inner city as a regional economic cluster of the highest Importance. Brisbane's knowledge corridor, following the river and measuring some 10 kilometres north to south, is made up of a whole series of dynamic central city precincts and places, encompassing a much wider area of employment, major hospitals, tertiary education, research institutes, parklands and the city's key visitor destinations and event venues, all supported by major infrastructure investment including the Brisbane Metro and Cross River Rail alignments that are bringing these inner city places closer together. Sound familiar?

Back in Auckland, in this brave new era of CRL, why don't we break out of the confines of the motorway ring and take this approach to scale up and drive uplift across a much greater area of central Auckland like Brisbane is doing? A 5km radius outside of Auckland's city centre zone takes in much of the city's critical social and community infrastructure, including Auckland City Hospital, the Museum and Auckland Domain, major secondary schools, Eden Park, MoTAT, Western Springs and the Auckland Zoo. Then there is Newmarket - why would we continue to think of it and hold it back as a second rate metropolitan centre subsidiary, somehow separate from and not an integral part of the central city? .



Similarly, for the first time, we could properly recognise and invest in the economic role the city fringe neighbourhoods, from Ponsonby to Parnell, play as an important employment, entertainment and hospitality belt that surrounds the city centre and that already foster innovation identifying drawcards that can drive economic growth for the city's future.

As we heard at a recent UDINZ event, CRL is shrinking geography and bringing many of these areas closer together. If we really want to leverage the benefits of CRL then Maungawhau to Morningside should be just the beginning.

In this new era, we should be looking for uplift across a much larger tranche of the inner city as an enlarged economic engine and increasingly connected centrepiece for Auckland.

Imagine if we took the opportunity to apply this sort of fresh thinking to all aspects of the city's planning and growth, where we might get to?

For too long, while never quite expressed as such, the prevailing attitude at Auckland Council has been that we are not in need of any new visions, strategies or plans; that we already have a spatial plan in the Auckland Plan (when is the last time you even heard it mentioned?!) and that we already did a great job with the Unitary Plan which already enables so much development capacity for future growth.

Meanwhile, 16 years have passed since the supercity amalgamation, 14 years since the landmark first Auckland Plan, and 10 years since the Independent Hearings Panel made their decisions on the Auckland Unitary Plan.

Digging in the heels can only go on for so long. There comes a time to renew long term strategy and vision, and for Auckland, that time is now.

With a new national planning regime coming into force, the CRL up and running, and with the significant milestone of a city population of two million people shortly ahead of us as the Mayor points out in his manifesto, we need to take a good hard look at our city and create a climate where we are open to new ideas for the future, not just a rehash of what we already have.

As we shortly head into 2027, with a new government (trustfully) in place and ready to engage, it is time to lift our sights, to think bigger and bolder, and envision a future for our city that is more than just the sum of a series of short term, reactionary decisions.

Let's embrace this opportunity to positively shape the systems that in turn shape our city, with a new shared vision for the future.