

# JOHN ROBSON on Tauranga City Council for REAL CHANGE in Tauranga City Council

## Introduction

My name is John Robson – and I currently am one of four Councillors at Large.

For the last three years, in addition to the committee memberships held by all Councillors, I have held the following positions:

- Chair of the Finance & Risk Committee
- Member of the SmartGrowth Implementation Committee
- Member of the Tangata Whenua / Tauranga City Council Committee

I treat my position as City Councillor as a full-time job - and based on a 40-hour week, my hourly pay rate is \$34.79 before tax.

In terms of scheduled briefings, workshops, Committee and Council meetings, I have the best attendance record of any Councillor.

## My Career

After completing a BMS at Waikato (1978-1981), and a 5-year 'OE' (1983-1987) which was largely spent working in a UK pub in the winter and working in the Algarve in Portugal in the summer, at age 28, I got a 'proper' job.

While in the UK in 1988, I was offered a consultancy role by a one-man start-up. After a three year 'apprenticeship', I was confident enough to leave what had become a successful 'group', and join a larger organisation.

Faced with two offers, I chose the wrong one – joining a market research company with poor systems and a dysfunctional culture. Despite the systems and culture, I was able to successfully develop a reputation that led to me being head-hunted within a year.

I joined TUP in 1992. TUP's core business was turning data into information via ICT, and my role was to set up a research function to supply key data – and develop an analysis and consultancy offer. Success at both resulted in a Board role – and the attention of another head-hunter.

In 1995, Wolff Olins, one of the world's leading corporate brand consultancies was losing business to traditional consultancies who spoke the language of the Boardroom. In a defensive move, they recruited a number of management consultants – of which I was one. The opportunity to work in a creative environment at Board level was too good to turn down.

I was given free rein with the twin objectives of building an income generating team – and bringing in a big automotive client.

By 2000, my team's fee income had exceeded NZ\$10,000,000 – and I'd been invited to pitch Wolff Olins as the strategic brand consultancy for General Motors.

## Tauranga Today

I believe that Tauranga today is largely directionless.

Aside from managing growth, there is no clear strategy – nor has there been any real attempt to engage with the community to create one.

I also believe that the city is not working for the residents – the disproportionate share of the rates burden that falls on residential ratepayers is proof of that.

I believe that the lack of strategy – and unfair burdening of residential ratepayers – is simply a result of voting in well-meaning people who lack the requisite skills to do the job.

## Looking back

Over the last three years, I believe that your Council has delivered mixed results.

For every good decision (e.g. subsidising the University move to the city), there have been poor decisions (e.g. subsidising Trustpower's move).

However overall I rate Council's performance as a D.

I believe the substantial change to the 'team' of Councillors in 2013 was primarily due to concern about rates and debt.

So regardless of the merits of specific decisions (e.g. Greerton Library vs. High Performance Sports Centre), the key question for me is, has Council addressed rates and debt?

And with debt increasing (even after substantial asset sales) and rates increasing much faster than inflation, I cannot give Council a 'pass'.

## You have a choice

In my professional opinion, you already have some of the best Board Directors in the country working for you.

They sit on the Board of the Council Controlled Organisation, Bay Venues Limited (BVL).

Unfortunately, they are unlikely to ever put themselves forward to be Councillors.

Although, I know one did give serious consideration to running for Mayor this year - and if they had declared and committed earlier, I would have supported their candidacy.

I do not know the exact reasons they chose not to stand.

However, the city can still benefit from the wisdom of the BVL Board – if Councillors are smart enough to look, listen and learn.

BVL was created just over three years ago and the initial focus of the BVL Board has been getting a clear strategy and putting quality management information systems in place.

Because without a strategy you don't know where you are going - and without quality systems you don't know where you are.

Contrast this with Tauranga City Council which has no clear strategy – and very poor management information systems.

These fundamental issues should be the focus of your Councillors.

And, I would like to respectfully suggest that it should also be the focus of voters.

If you continue to vote for people who lack real relevant strategic management experience, the issues of rates and debt will never be addressed.

I am not suggesting that you vote only for people with such experience – but when you have a choice, voting for them might deliver the change you sought in 2013.

## Change

I am certain it is possible to redress the unfair burden on the residential ratepayer.

I am certain that, with the right leadership, Council can develop a strategic direction that is sustainable – and has the support of the people of Tauranga.

It will require a change to the way Council operates.

Which, I believe, will require a change in the team of current Councillors, not just the Mayor.

On October 8, we will know whether you want change that I promise.

## What I learnt

Reflecting on my career, this is what I learnt.

While there are similarities in basic principles, in practice there is a massive difference between a small business and a major corporate.

In a small business, the owner or director (often the same person) is invariably hands-on. In a major corporate, the directors (there is more than one) must rely on systems, processes, and above all, quality information.

In a small business, there is rarely much strategic thinking – the owner/director's focus is on doing. In a major corporate, without a clear strategy, there is nothing to keep the organisation effectively pointed in the same direction.

In a small business, the owner/director is effectively a dictator – there are few checks and balances. In a major corporate, there is no boss – the directors must work as a team – and as such, effective leadership is critical.

In a small business, the relationship with between the owner/director and the 'market' is very personal – what the customer needs is well understood. In a major corporate, there is significant distance between the directors and the market – and only effective customer insight systems will ensure that the organisation understands customers' needs – and responds accordingly.

In summary, while the owner of a small accountancy practice or a small food manufacturing company can honestly claim business experience, and possibly even business success – they are unlikely to be equipped for the Boardroom of a major corporate.

Indeed, no major corporate would take someone with only small business experience, or no business experience at all, and put them on the Board.

So why would voters – unless they had no choice.

## A Few Questions Answered:

Given what I believe should be the focus of voters, it is interesting to note that the most common questions I have been asked over the last two and a half months are:

- Do you support dedicated seats for or Tangata Whenua on Council?  
*No*
- What is your view of the Civic Heart project?  
*An expensive failure*
- Who is the best ward Councillor?  
*Leanne Brown*
- Did you really take no salary this term?  
*Yes*
- Why haven't you used a photo of yourself in your articles?  
*See right*
- What will you do if you are not re-elected?  
*Finish our house*
- Of all the new candidates standing, who do you think would be the best addition to the Council?  
*Antoine Coffin*

