

BAYBUZZ

BayBuzz Questions & Responses for CHB Mayoral Candidates

CHB Council has just reviewed its spending plans for improving the district's water infrastructure, deferring some projects considerably. Do you support this approach even if it delays important improvements?

Will Foley: I recognise the immense pressure facing our ratepayers, and the initial proposals for water infrastructure spending were clearly unaffordable for many families and businesses. A key responsibility of a council is to listen to its community, and the message from submitters was clear. As mayor, I would not support a plan that forces our residents to leave the district.

However, we must also be realistic. While I support the revised approach as a necessary measure to ease financial pressure, we cannot ignore the long-term risk. Deferring critical water projects is not a solution; it is a delay. We must use this time wisely to find smarter, more cost-effective ways to deliver this essential infrastructure. My commitment is to a common-sense approach that balances affordability today with the critical need for a resilient and healthy water network for the future. The conversation isn't over; it's just shifted, and we need to find a better path forward. And let's not forget, there is the rest of the organisation to assess and ensure that efficiencies can always be improved.

Alex Walker: Yes, I support the decision—though it's frustrating, it reflects the kind of tough, responsible leadership councils must exercise in today's complex economic and legislative environment. Over my nine years as Mayor, we've done the hard work: lifting old bandaids, confronting the realities of aging infrastructure, and building a clear picture of what our district needs. That transparency has ensured our community understands what we are facing and has positioned us to make informed, strategic choices with some pace. Right now we need to be able to see a pathway that better prioritises affordability for our households and changing our investment approach is one way we can make a significant difference to that, where government policy hasn't been able to.

While final decisions on the programme's shape are still ahead, they're built on a foundation of strong governance, good asset knowledge and a commitment to long-term outcomes. What disappoints me most is the need to slow our environmental aspirations—particularly around how we reuse treated wastewater. Ideally, we'd be removing it from our rivers and using it to add value to land-use. But under current funding and regulatory constraints, that vision isn't yet achievable.

Name 2-3 specific CHBDC projects, policies or spends over the past three years with which you personally disagree.

Will Foley: I believe a council's core purpose is to enable its community and economy to prosper, not to create unnecessary barriers. I have three key areas of concern with recent council decisions:

The new District Plan: While a plan is necessary, the current one has introduced an excessive amount of new regulations and red tape. This adds a significant financial and administrative burden

on our residents and businesses, at a time when they are already struggling with the cost of living. We must review these policies to ensure they are truly necessary and not just contributing to a cycle of extraction from our ratepayers without delivering proportional value.

The Representation Review: Given Central Hawke's Bay's population size and the ongoing regional conversations about amalgamation, I believe the decision to increase the number of councillors was a step in the wrong direction. A smaller, more efficient council would be better suited to our scale, saving costs, rewarding the remaining councillors better and ensuring we are agile and responsive. If we are to drive efficiencies and a positive culture, then it starts at the top.

Procurement Policy: It is incredibly frustrating to see local businesses lose out on contracts to out-of-town contractors. When profits and wages leave the district, our local economy suffers. While we must ensure value for money, a more robust 'buy local' policy should be a priority. We need to support the businesses that support our community and ensure our rate dollars circulate within the Central Hawke's Bay economy.

Alex Walker: This is an unusual question for a Mayor because my role is to guide our council toward the best collective decisions possible—and then to lead publicly with unity and strength. I'm proud of the cohesion and courage our governance team has shown, even when the decisions have been tough. That said, there are a couple of initiatives I personally disagreed with, even though I ultimately helped lead their implementation as part of council's majority position.

First, I voted against CHBDC joining the C4LD group to oppose the previous government's Three Waters Reform. As one of the most financially constrained councils in the country—facing serious underinvestment and compliance challenges in water infrastructure—I felt it was disingenuous to position ourselves in that group as opponents rather than collaborators. Our community needed solutions, not slogans.

Second, during our Three-Year Plan deliberations, a last-minute resolution was moved to increase the land transport rate by \$200,000. I opposed it. We didn't have the capacity or a confirmed agreement with NZTA to deliver on the additional spend. The rate was collected in 2024, only to be reduced again in 2025—proving it was an unnecessary impost (particularly on rural ratepayers) with no real value delivered.

Do you support construction of the 'new' Ruataniwha Dam? Do you believe Council should invest ratepayer funds in it?

Will Foley: The Ruataniwha Water Storage Scheme has a long and complex history. Given how much time has passed and how circumstances have changed, it would be irresponsible to support or oppose the project without an up-to-date, comprehensive business case. We need to see clear, current data on the project's financial viability, its physical design, the projected water demand and the potential returns for our district. The key is a modern, transparent, and rigorous assessment. Once that business case is presented to the community, we can have a well-informed and meaningful debate on whether it is the right investment for Central Hawke's Bay's future.

Alex Walker: Yes, I support the Tukituki Water Security Project and the efforts to reshape the business model for a new catchment-scale water storage solution on the Makaroro River. Water security is critical to the future of Central Hawke's Bay—and to the wider region.

However, it would be irresponsible for a council of CHBDC's size to carry significant financial investment or risk in a project of this scale. This is infrastructure of regional and national significance,

and we've consistently advocated for shared responsibility. I'm pleased that water security remains a strategic priority across Hawke's Bay, and that this united regional stance has helped unlock government investment through the Regional Infrastructure Fund.

We've also supported the establishment of the Hawke's Bay Community Water Trust—a partnered and principled community-led body that can help shape a strategic, values-based approach to water security.

That said, I'm not naïve about CHBDC's future involvement. Our urban water consents are directly affected by low river flows, and as the business model evolves, Council may need to play a role. If and when that time comes, it must be guided by robust analysis and a transparent community conversation.

CHB seems on its way to becoming Hawke's Bay's solar capital. Do you support that development?

Will Foley: I fully support the development of renewable energy projects in Central Hawke's Bay, provided they are environmentally sound and, critically, economically viable. Our district is well-positioned to lead the way in solar energy, and such developments could bring significant benefits to our region including resilience around electricity. It aligns with a forward-looking, sustainable vision for our community. The key is to ensure these projects are developed in a way that respects our landscapes and provides tangible benefits to our residents.

Alex Walker: Yes. Diversifying our land use and economy is essential for building a resilient future, and renewable energy must be part of that equation.

However, New Zealand has a history of "boom and bust" industries, and we need to ensure this emerging sector is right-sized and responsibly managed. I believe stronger central regulation is needed to guide development, safety, and appropriate scale. CHB can benefit from solar energy growth—if we get the balance right.

Do you believe councils' rates should be 'capped' by legislation?

Will Foley: The continued rate rises above the rate of inflation are simply not sustainable. Nor is the debt growth trajectory. Mathematically, this model will eventually outpace income growth, and we are already seeing the devastating effects on our families and businesses. While I am a strong advocate for disciplined financial management, a simple cap on rates could risk underfunding essential services and infrastructure.

Therefore, I support a rate-capping framework, with the crucial caveat of retaining the ability for the council to consult with the community on funding for significant capital projects that may require a rise above the cap. This comes though after all other avenues of efficiency gains and wastage elimination have been undertaken. The long-term goal must be to get into a cycle where we are consistently funding depreciation to smooth out the need for large, sudden capital injections. This will lead to a more predictable, affordable, and sustainable financial future for our district.

Alex Walker: Absolutely not. Legislating a cap on council rates is an overreach by central government and undermines the foundations of local democracy. It's up to our communities—not Wellington—to hold councils accountable. We are not just a service delivery agency, we are the closest layer of democracy to our communities and we play a vital leadership role. That's why robust debate, diverse candidacy, and active participation in local elections are so critical.

There's a troubling pattern of central government deflecting responsibility onto local councils, especially when government itself fails to provide the right legislative and funding frameworks for our local success. Rates in Central Hawke's Bay have risen for two key reasons: first, we're addressing decades of underinvestment and non-compliance in our waters infrastructure; second, we've faced extraordinary economic pressures—rising interest rates, inflation, and the recovery from Cyclone Gabrielle—all beyond our control.

A rates cap wouldn't solve any of these challenges. In fact, it would make it harder for councils like ours to deliver the infrastructure and services our communities need.

The best accountability comes from the ballot box—not blunt legislation.

Do you *personally* support retaining Māori seats at your council table?

Will Foley: The decision to establish Māori wards was made by majority vote of the current council, and the community will have the opportunity to have their say via a referendum. My role as a mayoral candidate is to focus on what is within my direct control and what is most pressing for the entire community. I believe the most critical challenge facing Central Hawke's Bay is its financial viability and the cost-of-living crisis. My focus as mayor will be on bringing a common-sense approach to our financial troubles and ensuring the council's core services and infrastructure are soundly managed for the benefit of all residents including Māori.

Alex Walker: Yes, absolutely. My view is simple: if those on the Māori electoral roll choose to exercise their democratic right to be represented as tangata whenua through a ward, then it is our responsibility to honour that choice.

The voice from our local Tamatea Central Hawke's Bay rangatira and whānau was clear—they want to engage in local democracy through dedicated representation. Supporting that is not about giving anyone more rights or taking anything away from others. We are building a stronger, more representative, and future-focused leadership for our whole community.

Does Hawke's Bay need five councils, or do you support amalgamation, in any form?

Will Foley: Based on my six years of experience on the Hawke's Bay Regional Council, I believe that a regional approach to governance can work for certain issues. I would support the amalgamation of Napier and Hastings to create a more unified metropolitan authority. However, I am firmly opposed to the amalgamation of Central Hawke's Bay into a larger super-city model.

Our district has its own distinct identity, its own unique challenges, and its own strong sense of community. We need to retain our local governance to ensure our voice is heard and our specific needs are met. We must collaborate with our neighbours and where I see a lot of improvement available to us, but we must also protect our local autonomy.

Alex Walker: Hawke's Bay doesn't need full amalgamation—but it does need stronger, more coordinated local government if we are to achieve a more affordable and future-focused region. We must strike a balance between efficient service delivery and the unique, autonomous leadership that each city and district brings to community and to the collective table.

In 2015, the public debate on amalgamation revealed a clear divide between these philosophies, with voters ultimately choosing to retain individual councils. But the solution isn't binary. I believe

the future lies in a new Regional Partnership model—one that moves beyond the choice of either full autonomy or full amalgamation.

Imagine a series of regional business units focused on key infrastructure and regulatory functions. This would allow us to consolidate expertise, reduce duplication, and unlock funding at scale—while preserving local accountability and leadership. We can't just duplicate functions locally and regionally, we need a sensible system that puts the right parts at the right level. Current legislation doesn't support this well, but we're already testing the concept through initiatives like the Matariki regional economic development strategy and the rollout of our new regional Water Services CCO.

Central Hawke's Bay cannot afford to deliver all the infrastructure and services our community deserves without deeper regional partnerships. But we must also retain the localism that enables us to act independently—especially in times of crisis, as we saw during Cyclone Gabrielle.

It's time to design a smarter, more unified future—without losing what makes each community unique, and includes strong transparent and accountable processes.

Would you support Councils appointing an independent “Hawke’s Bay Auditor General” to monitor councils’ spending and programme performance?

Will Foley: I support any initiative that increases transparency and accountability in local government. However, we must first assess whether an independent 'Hawke's Bay Auditor General' would be a new layer of costly bureaucracy rather than a genuine solution.

I believe that true accountability starts with the council itself. As mayor, I would champion a culture of zero tolerance for wasteful spending, regardless of size, and ensure that our ratepayers' money is treated with the utmost respect. We need to be the auditors of our own house, rather than relying solely on another external body.

Alex Walker: No, I don't believe appointing a regional “Hawke’s Bay Auditor General” is necessary. At CHBDC, we already embrace a wide range of independent monitoring frameworks and proudly lead one of the most transparent and high-performing councils in the country.

We've repeatedly undergone independent assessment through CouncilMark™, achieving an AA rating—the highest of any rural council in New Zealand, up from a BB just three years earlier. Our Risk and Assurance Committee includes two experienced independent members, one of whom chairs the committee. We also maintain comprehensive internal and external audit processes across all financial and non-financial responsibilities.

Existing systems like the Transport Insights portal from the Roothing Efficiency Group, or the new DIA Council Performance Dashboards, could easily be pulled together into one Hawke's Bay-related performance platform to provide a consistent picture without the need for a whole new functional role.