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MEDIA STATEMENT (for immediate release)

Economic clock ticking while critics tinker

The region's economic clock is ticking and there are problems that must be addressed if greater Wellington is to avoid becoming an international 'also ran'. That's the view of Ian Buchanan, chairman of the Wellington Regional Strategy (WRS) committee.

The WRS is a long term economic growth plan that was released for public consultation on September 30. Since then public meetings have been held in Porirua, Kapiti, Hutt City and Upper Hutt.

Mr Buchanan said there had been an average attendance of 50 at each of the meetings which had yielded some good questions and informed criticism. "That's good because it helps us hone the strategy which is what the consultation process is about."

However Mr Buchanan said there had also been ill informed feedback and it was obvious some had been wound up by fictitious reports of rate blow outs and lavish launch functions. "You can't blame the ratepayers. If I had been told \$200,000 had been spent on a launch glitz blitz, \$5million was going to be added to rates and that the strategy leaders were on a greed and power trip, I'd be angry too."

"These claims are complete rubbish and it's time the nonsense stopped. The launch 'glitz blitz' was actually a function held at the regional stadium which cost \$8000. Additional funding was used to send information to ratepayers. This is a legal requirement and one I support. How can we expect to get feedback from ratepayers if we don't tell them what's proposed. The \$5 million in new rates is actually \$0.6m and most of those on the WRS committee receive no additional payments so how this satisfies 'greed and power' ambitions is anyone's guess."

"This issue is far too important to be used as a political grandstanding opportunity. Greater Wellington's economic performance is poor and has been for some time. We're growing at half the national average and to make matters worse, New Zealand, in a global context, is a poor performer," he says.

“We all have family or friends who have moved permanently to Australia and beyond. They’ve mainly done so because they can earn more - \$440 per week on average – across the ditch than they can here. This is a massive difference and it simply must be addressed.”

Mr Buchanan said the strategy was a first class document, a reflection of the extent of research and consultation that had gone into its development. He said the extra rate, an average of \$3 per household per year, represented outstanding value. In spite of this much of the debate had centred on the impact on rates. “This is a result of scare mongering about rate blow outs. The fact is, Rome’s burning and we’re squabbling over the price of a cup of coffee.”

Mr Buchanan said eight of the region’s nine mayors had shown excellent leadership in getting the strategy to the consultation stage. “Of course there are aspects we don’t all agree on but we do recognise that regional cooperation is necessary and we have taken action.”

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