

Bigger than Hamilton: Inside Auckland's \$1b boom suburb



By **Ben Leahy**

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Auckland shoppers are buzzing now Costco is close to opening its first New Zealand store in Westgate. Yet there are fresh questions over whether the area can become the city's next boom suburb or whether grinding traffic jams and "shoebox housing" will stunt its growth, writes Ben Leahy.

Irene Chiang sees a future seesawing between promise and concern.

She and fiancée William Chang love the Westgate townhouse they bought in Auckland's outer northwest.

It's modern, warm, cheap by Auckland standards and allows Irene to work from home two to three times a week.

When the Herald on Sunday comes midweek, she jumps from behind her laptop to answer in her pyjamas, her kitten playing at her feet.

The couple knew before buying their house that Costco would be opening in the area. That gave them hope Westgate would bloom into Auckland's next major metropolitan centre and raise home values with it.

Now, however, they're increasingly worried by the lack of parking and public transport options, "claustrophobic" development and lack of local jobs.

Auckland Council considers Westgate one of the city's four major growth areas, alongside Manukau in the south, Albany in the north and the central business district in Auckland's heart.

Pointing to rolling pasture and hay bales in a nearby field, Chang says he's seen development plans for the area.

"It looks like it is just going to be similar to where we are standing now – high-density, shoe box housing, not a lot of parks, reserves or even car parks."

"How the infrastructure will keep up is a concern."

Cranes stretch above townhouse roofs as he speaks, cars compete for parks on newly-tarred roads and trampolines squeeze into tiny yards.

In the distance, ever more farmland is being carved up, leaving behind a patchwork of new housing and fields.

There's bustle and activity – and a hope Westgate's new housing can help ease Auckland's shortage, giving first home buyers a chance to buy. But is it an urban sprawl Aucklanders want to live in?

The centre of Auckland's northwest

Thirty years ago, Westgate was a sea of market gardens, strawberry fields and the odd standalone home with a decent-sized backyard, says Jeff Knight, 55, who grew up in the area. He now runs the Uturn Caffeination cafe on Fred Taylor Drive, a main thoroughfare that separates residential from retail.

Council hopes the suburb can become the centre of the city's northwest, offering jobs, shopping, services and entertainment to a growing population.

Developers, the NZ Retail Property Group, first planned it as a town centre together with the Waitākere City Council in the 1990s.

That plan split the 56ha town centre – which has already had more than \$1 billion of investment ploughed into it – into zones for malls, big box retailers, community services, parks, offices and apartment blocks.

Westgate Shopping Centre was the first to open in 1998 before additional zones, such as the NorthWest Shopping Centre and Westgate Lifestyle mall, opened in 2015 and 2017 respectively.

Tech giant Microsoft selected it for its first New Zealand data centre aimed at giving local businesses faster cloud computing services, while Costco's imminent \$100m-plus mega store opening is the latest to generate excitement.

Visitors to Westgate can now watch movies at Event Cinemas, grab coffee and food at Starbucks or Burger King, buy fridges and TVs at Harvey Norman, pick up a hammer at Mitre 10, shop for a wide range of clothes and groceries and even buy a house.

The Redhills Precinct is a 600ha suburb being developed adjacent to the Westgate metro centre. It started sprouting up in partnership with a range of developers in 2019.

Auckland Council estimates as many as 80,000 extra people and 30,000 new homes will be in Westgate and the surrounding areas like Whenuapai, Kumeu and Huapai by 2050.

Campbell Barbour – general manager of projects with the NZ Retail Property Group – believes there is capacity for up to 200,000 extra people. That's bigger than Hamilton or Tauranga.

However, the growth won't happen overnight, Barbour says.

Heavily populated Manukau started growing back in the 1960s, while Albany started in the 1980s.

By contrast, Westgate's development only really kicked off in the early 2000s.

Data by analysts CoreLogic shows only a handful of homes selling in Westgate in each quarter before 2019.

However, since the start of 2019 there have been 387 homes sold, with prices typically ranging from \$750,000 to \$1.2 million. Two-bedroom, 79m2 homes are still being advertised for \$769,000.

"Westgate is developing and without question it is going to be in the near-to-medium future a very significant employment, retail and community anchor in the northwest," says Chris Darby, chair of Auckland Council's planning committee.

However, he and Barbour acknowledge that while Westgate already has big retail brands, like Costco, it still lacks much of what makes a successful city centre.

That includes medium-to-high rise apartments and office space as well as a vibrant community life that bubbles with entertainment options, bars, restaurants and cafes.

Public transport – the city's forgotten corner

Poor public transport links have placed a "huge handbrake" on the speed of Westgate's apartment and office development, Barbour says.

Chiang agrees.

She tries to avoid the bus on the days she heads to her city centre workplace.

To get to her bus stop, she needs to walk 25 minutes along the side of busy Fred Taylor Drive where footpaths are few and far between and cars whizz by at 80km/h. The bus journey takes about another hour on top.

She prefers to drive or be dropped at the West Harbour ferry, which takes 35 minutes into the city.

However, the ferry is expensive at about \$16 per round trip, and only leaves at 30-minute intervals.

Darby says Westgate badly needs rapid public transit.

It has been shown time and again around the world that when rapid transit is "quality, frequent and affordable" it gives a big boost to the business and community "vitality" of city centres, he says.

Yet there are no finalised plans for a modern rapid transit system to Westgate.

Critics point the finger at John Key's former National government for missing a golden opportunity to include a dedicated busway in the major upgrade it commissioned in the early 2010s to widen the SH16 Northwestern Motorway and connect it with the SH20 Southwestern ring road.

Now transport authorities are instead spending \$100m on stop-gap improvements, including a "pop-up" busway on the Northwestern Motorway.

It is expected to be finished in mid-2023 and will convert existing motorway shoulders into bus lanes to eventually provide more express services into the city.

Yet the improvements are unlikely to be as popular as Albany's Northern Busway which operates as an express service in a dedicated lane, rather than on the shoulder next to car lanes.

Barbour says Auckland Council's decision in 2019 to locate a new \$120m hub for hundreds of its staff in Albany rather than Westgate felt especially cynical.

Part of its reason was because Albany has better public transport links, he says.

"Which is ironic, given they are the people who are supposed to be providing the public transport to Westgate," Barbour says.

Darby – who until recently sat on the establishment board of light rail in Auckland – says he expects the Government to push ahead with a multi-billion dollar southern light rail route from the city to Mangere.

If it does, he expects it will then give a "strong" signal for light rail to also be built to the North Shore and Westgate. But that remains up in the air.

That leaves Graham McIntyre, owner of the local Mike Pero Kumeu Real Estate branch, asking what happens in the meantime.

"Are we just going to rely on roads that already can't cope as we put in an extra 20,000 to 30,000 houses?"

'Duplex mayhem'

McIntyre believes that reliance on cars is already causing tension in the housing developments.

He is critical of what he calls the "viral" spread of "cookie-cutter" duplexes, built on small parcels of land.

City planners seeking to get as many homes built as possible have zoned the area surrounding Westgate's town centre for higher density housing and put in no incentive for off-street parking or garaging.

McIntyre says that would make sense if Westgate's public transport worked well.

But with most residents relying on their cars, the housing was often not providing off-street parking, creating ugly streets with cars parked on verges and every available gap, he says.

And if there is one thing that can "really get up people's schnozzles", it is getting home after a long day's commute and fighting for car parks, he says.

"It's kind of getting into a position of a perfect storm for people to get past road rage – it is duplex mayhem."

McIntyre also argues there seems to be little co-ordination between housing developments to ensure they link their footpaths and cycleways and ensure they are complementary to each other.

By contrast, he says the nearby master-planned community of Hobsonville Point has set the standards for new developments by laying down its parks, cycle paths, schools and infrastructure in advance of the housing.

Likewise, Albany has also successfully built a wide range of housing from lifestyle blocks and townhouses to multi-rise apartments, he says.

That has the advantage of allowing residents to stay in the same area as they go on their "housing journey" of first buying apartments or townhouses and then upgrading to larger family homes.

It's a journey that allows them to fall in love with the area and build a sense of community, McIntyre says.

Universal Homes is one of a number of developers building at Redhills with its 1400-home West Hills having sold all properties as part of stage one and two. Stage three offers two- and three-bedroom properties including terraces, duplexes and standalone homes.

Chief executive Andrew Crosby says the company supports rapid transit from the CBD "to the wealth of amenity in Northwest and wonderful value for money attractive housing with cycle lanes we have created".

"The sooner the Government and council can figure such an obvious link out, the better. They keep announcing and then nothing appears to happen. But I have supreme confidence that a busway is on its way. We'll take a train as well. Apparently, we won't need cars in the future so I imagine residents will turn whatever area they currently have in parking into beautifully manicured gardens with water features."

For Sandra Yeats, who lives in nearby Huapai, the new housing's flow-on effect is placing strain on her town's infrastructure.

Just travelling the 11km from Huapai to Westgate can sometimes take 40 minutes outside of peak hours now the traffic on SH16 leading into Kumeu has become so heavy, she says.

"This area was recently in the news because the roads are in such poor condition that locals are now working together to repair them," she says.

"There has been no infrastructure investment or improvement, the traffic and road conditions are appalling... we pay for our own waste management ... there are no real parks, the library is old ... [and] we still have to pay rural post."

She says it's sad because the region is one of Auckland's most beautiful, with city families driving out on weekends to go mountain biking, pick strawberries, visit wineries and surf along the picturesque west coast.

Building a vibrant city centre

One of the key goals by Westgate's planners and developers is to win the hearts and minds of northwest residents and businesses.

Westgate's Te Manawa community centre gives an embryonic glimpse of how that can be done.

Inside, parents and babies flock to the centre's play area, while near the entrance Christine Williams lays out a high tea for her Caffeine and Craft group's meeting.

She's brought her best china and silver platters in honour of member Lenore Paltridge's birthday and the passing of the winter solstice.

Meeting once a week to knit, the ladies discuss everything from family life to whether Costco's profits will stay in New Zealand.

They go to Westgate because it's central for members coming from suburbs such as Te Atatu, Swanson and Huapai.

And while they could knit at home, their group provides company.

"Besides the TV doesn't talk back," Williams jokes.

Everything the group knits is also for the community. That ranges from WWI remembrance poppies to tiny beanies the ladies give out to mums and their newborns during visits to Waitakere Hospital.

They're even busy knitting a Christmas tree to decorate the front of the Te Manawa centre to thank staff for letting them use the building.

Meanwhile, the Orra Coffee Shop bustles with regular customers, while diners trickle into the growing number of restaurants springing up between the "big box" retail stores.

To drive more customers to the food and entertainment areas, Westgate will need to grow up and provide more office space and residential apartments.

Barbour says typically one way to generate momentum for that is for the Government to relocate services and offices into a new area.

That's why the Auckland Council hub being built at Albany would have made a big difference in Westgate, he says.

Pete Evans, national director of property development at Colliers, says his team is working with a developer looking to build an eight to nine storey residential apartment in Westgate, but the economic conditions aren't quite right yet.

He doesn't expect to see "a whole heap" of apartment complexes springing up in the short term.

Still, Barbour remains confident Westgate will develop when the time is right.

His team has already master-planned the entire town centre with reserves and roads already built and spaces earmarked for office and residential apartments.

"Everyone wants things to happen faster, but when you are building towns it takes time," he says.

Chang and Chiang are less sure. They're optimistic Westgate can bloom into "the next Albany" and that the challenges facing it are just growing pains, but they also worry they are sign of deeper problems.

"Westgate is still in its infancy so we're hopeful but not sure what is going to happen in five to 10 years," Chang says.

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