

Frustrated Auckland developers call on council to turn up the consenting tap

By **Justin Latif**

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Auckland Council is being accused of blocking the flow of affordable houses, and industry leaders are calling for more streamlined systems.

Inefficient consent processing and a lack of Auckland Council staff is being blamed by property developers, industry leaders and even a city councillor for slowing the supply of houses into Auckland's property market.

Auckland property developers Steve and Grant* do everything from minor renovations, alterations and single dwellings, right up to multi-house large-scale developments.

The pair, who declined to use their real names, say council's processes at times seem arbitrary and unnecessary, and they would like to see a more streamlined approach adopted.

"It's like a tap, and the water is so restricted that it can't actually flow any more," says Steve. "It doesn't matter what you do."

Grant's more blunt.

"They are like dictators and nobody can say anything about them," he says.

"I have a friend in Rotorua who has finished three developments in the same time it took me to complete one. Even Wellington City Council is easier to deal with.

"You could blame one individual, or the structure of an organisation, or who and how they recruit, and how they out-source work. And maybe they're understaffed or maybe it's something else. But why are other towns more efficient?"

The pair cite one development that has taken two and a half years to get consented where it felt like they were going around in circles.

"They reply to you on the 19th or the 20th day [council staff are statutorily required to reply to an application within 20 working days], then you instantly respond and then you wait another 19 or 20 days and it just carries on forever. Every single thing that they could possibly ask, and then in the end they were back to square one asking for the same thing. It just carried on and on and on."

The Spinoff understands Auckland Council currently has 50 fewer consenting professionals than it did prior to Covid, due to a hiring freeze that was put in place when the pandemic hit.

Auckland councillor Angela Dalton says this is the first issue that needs to be rectified.

"They need to hire more people. I understand that we are outsourcing a lot of consenting, so that's part of it. Council is so focused on counting the number of staff, but what we should be focused on is outputs and outcomes."

The Manurewa-Papakura ward councillor says with the Long Term Plan due to be finalised, she would like to see the resourcing of consenting prioritised.

"When you're in a time of budgetary constraints, which we will be for a while, we really need to reassess what's our core business. What are we doing that we don't need to do any more? Some examples could be gyms or childcare centres. But I think we should be focused on the delivery of services [like consenting]."

John Tookey, professor of construction management at AUT University, says an aggressive recruitment drive would be challenging, given many of those with the right skills come from the United Kingdom. But he says another solution would be to develop more streamlined processes.

"One way to improve this process is to create a standardised consent process. There's a lot of standardised housing solutions, like what GJ Gardener does. There should be some way that as soon as you choose one of the standardised houses, you

should get automatic consent for that, but that does not happen.

"Having to have something checked that's been checked 1000 times before seems a little weird. And there should be some bonus associated with [building off a standardised design], rather than treating every house as bespoke, which apparently is what tends to happen at the moment."

Universal Homes is one of Auckland's largest developers. Its chief executive Andrew Crosby says the processes "get pretty frustrating at times", and his company would have been building 250 homes had it not been for difficulties getting key infrastructure built.

"We're doing a big one in Westgate at the moment," he says. "The housing infrastructure fund was going to pay to put an arterial road right through the middle of the site, and it was all agreed, and then we've spent two or three years where nothing could be agreed on, and last year, they said there was no money."

He says the infrastructure funding for their site had been reprioritised and it meant they've started building just 77 houses, instead of over 200 as was planned.

"There's a lack of consistent planning and millions and millions of dollars have been added to the project as a result."

Crosby says he sympathises with the council is one area – the fact it's often dealing with inexperienced and at times shoddy developers.

"There are a lot of smaller developers who have no idea how to figure out the subdivision approval process," he says. "They are so amateur and they don't spend the right money on the right consultants, and then they blame the council, but some of them are just hopeless. So developers have to take some responsibility."

Auckland Council's director of regulatory services, Craig Hobbs, says his team has processed 17 per cent more consents this year compared to the same time last year, but he also admits council is short-staffed currently and it's something his team is working hard to address.

"We've done 17,500 dwelling consents, and if you're talking total consents, which includes alterations, additions etc, you're talking over 20,000. On average we're taking 27 statutory days to get a consent out the door. But in the last couple of months there's no doubt been some slippage and we're working to address that."

He also points out that a lot of his staff's time is taken up providing basic feedback to developers who don't know the regulations.

"We could do better and we're working on an improvement programme which will take us two to three years to implement. But the industry, in some areas, do need an uppercut, because a large number of consents we get are really poor quality. And then developers are telling their customers that it's the council's fault.

"But the reality is that for a huge number of consents we're having to go back to customers with really basic issues that are missing off their plans, and it's wasting a lot of time and creates a lot of angst with us."

Tookey says the current pressures on the industry has been created by a perfect storm of circumstances and he expects very little to change in the short term.

"Since 2008 we've been experiencing 13 years of high growth rates and we're struggling. And at the same time, we don't have the influx of additional labour coming into the market – and you need skilled labour to build houses.

"We've got a finite capacity within our border and the industry is struggling to keep up with the demand. So we have a massively volatile mix and inevitably, it is having a big impact."

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