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THE RETURN OF A BLAST FROM THE PAST – THE GREAT COUNCIL RATES DEBATE

It was almost five weeks out from the October 8 election day when someone in the Auckland mayoral race lit the rates rise fuse.

Once a staple ingredient, the great "how much will you put rates up by?" question looked like it might never surface. (Spoiler alert: It shouldn't).

Labour and Greens-endorsed Efeso Collins left the door open. Collins has repeatedly referred to rates as a proportion of household income, being well below what is measured in one formula as "affordable".

It's an academic way of talking that is removed from the way most people see their rates bills, and is so esoteric that finally "The Fixer" Wayne Brown accused Collins of being comfortable with an almost doubling of rates till they hit the 5% "affordability" mark.

This is not a time to bring out the hoary old rates rise chestnut – and perhaps unwittingly, the Taxpayers' Union offshoot, the Auckland Ratepayers Alliance, has best illustrated that.

The activists, who once pedalled a 2% rates pledge for candidates to sign up to, are now floating a 2022 version.

They are seeking a guarantee candidates won't support anything above the Consumer Price Index (CPI) – the official measure of household inflation.

The CPI is running at 7.3%, with high inflation a global phenomenon.

If it stays there – it may rise – it would give those elected the Auckland Ratepayers Alliance's blessing to raise rates by nearly twice the previous Auckland Council record, apart from a "one-off" 5% in 2021.

Even in its day, 2016, the ideological war between the 2 per centers and the 2.5 per centers was silly.

Much of Auckland's infrastructure catch-up in water and stormwater stems from politicians who historically spent what was politically sellable, rather than what the city needed.

Despite nonsensical campaign talk of the council being "broke" (Craig Lord) or "losing three million dollars a day" (Wayne Brown), its finances by most measures are solid, except when compared to how it was pre-Covid-19.

It continues to invest in infrastructure at record levels and debt as a proportion of revenue (the key measure of debt) is lower than pre-Covid-19 – helped by a slowdown in big projects through lockdowns.

The operational budget balances as it always had and global credit rating agencies have it in the double-A zone.

The fiscal forecast, though, is more about headwinds than tailwinds. Retiring mayor Phil Goff acknowledges that future rates may need to rise more than they had on his watch.

Auckland has huge and urgent challenges, such as shifting the dial on global warming trying to maintain infrastructure investment, despite a reduced allocation in this year's budget.

Wayne Brown, who constantly tells audiences it's all about "the numbers", has been wise enough to avoid hanging his hat on a rates rise number.

Brown could help by spelling out how, and more importantly when, he could extract his much-talked about $400 million divided from the council-owned Ports of Auckland.

This year, it reported an operating profit of $27.4 million and paid a $14.2 million dividend to the council.

All the main candidates talk of the need to make the council more efficient and reduce waste – programmes that continue inside council as they speak.

Sure, there's always more that can be found. But mayoral candidates should avoid the rate trap and focus clearly on what needs to be done, what (in their view) doesn't and how it will be paid for. Rates will be just a part of that story.