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NEW ZEALAND

Central Auckland Reborn: Crime, Covid and community - how can the city centre bounce back?

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Central Auckland Reborn
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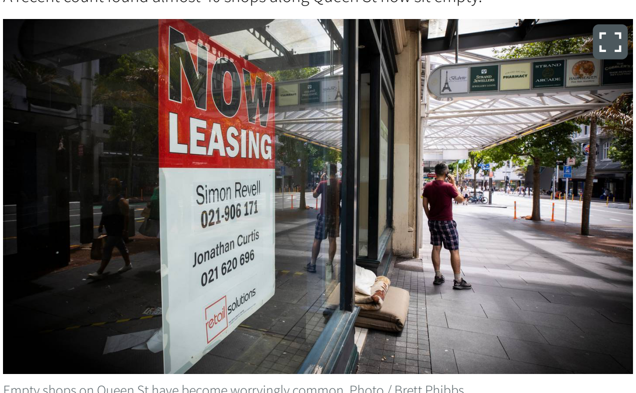
There are many metrics that tell the story of Covid-19's devastating impact on Auckland's city centre.

Foot traffic fell a whopping 95 per cent during last year's Delta lockdown.

Reports of crime in the central city have risen by 36 per cent, when compared with pre-pandemic levels.

Consumer spending dropped by as much as 35 per cent, starving retail and hospitality businesses.

A recent count found almost 40 shops along Queen St now sit empty.



Empty shops on Queen St have become worryingly common. Photo / Brett Phibbs

The number of people employed in the city centre dropped by 7 per cent between 2020 and 2021.

Its residential population reportedly fell by 20,000 thanks to an exodus of students.

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But while Covid-19 is far from over, green shoots are appearing as Kiwis try to navigate the "new normal".

The same goes for Auckland's city centre, with key stakeholders now discussing how the country's business hub can evolve following the pandemic.

In a four-day series, the NZ Herald is investigating what's being debated for the future of Auckland's city centre and how it can recover from years under Covid's thumb.

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'We need to feel safe and secure'

Wayne Beverley has lived in the city centre for two decades but isn't its biggest advocate.

Late last year, Beverley - who lived in an historic building on Lorne St - went so far as to compare central Auckland to 1980s New York, but with fewer murders.

Speaking to the Herald this week, the flight attendant by trade says life in the city centre has actually improved slightly as Covid's grip on society has loosened.

Wayne Beverley has lived in the city centre for two decades. Photo / Greg Bowker

However, that's where his positivity ends.

"It's less intimidating but still awful," he says.

"It's still somewhere where I wouldn't want my partner to go out at night."

Beverley's safety concerns link to central Auckland's current spike in crime, which includes 5633 thefts, 2130 assaults, and 154 aggravated robberies reported in the year to March.

As a result, Beverley says, the liveability of the city centre is compromised.

"To be more liveable, we need to feel safe and secure and want to venture out of our homes after 8pm.

"We need to be enticed back into our communities and we're not, we're rewarded staying inside our apartments because we feel safe."

Others don't share his view and instead see the city centre as more liveable than it's ever been.

Rosie Russell, owner of Pink Neon Sign cafe on High St, originally hails from out west but now feels at home in the central hub, particularly after the pandemic.

"I feel a lot more of a community vibe now."

Rosie Russell, owner of the Pink Neon Sign cafe on High St. Photo / Alex Burton

She sees significant potential in Auckland's recovery from Covid, one that she's not willing to miss out on.

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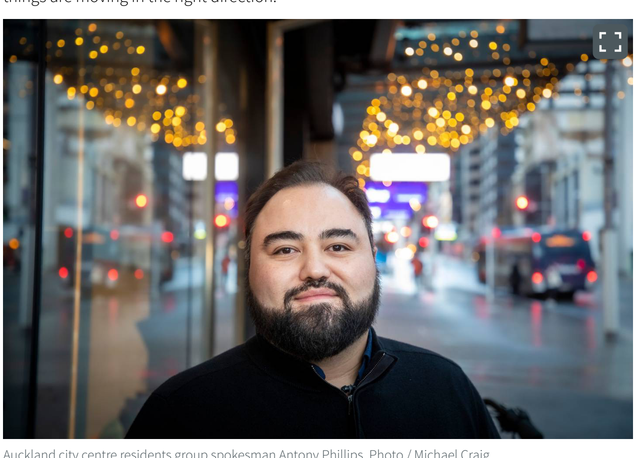
"This last year has been a lot of, 'Should I move to London, should I move to Melbourne', but if we keep running away, it's never going to change so I'm committing to that."

Impressions of a more communal city centre are backed up by anecdotal reports of more families taking up the vacant apartments.

It's an evolution that reassures city centre residents group spokesman Antony Phillips that things are moving in the right direction.

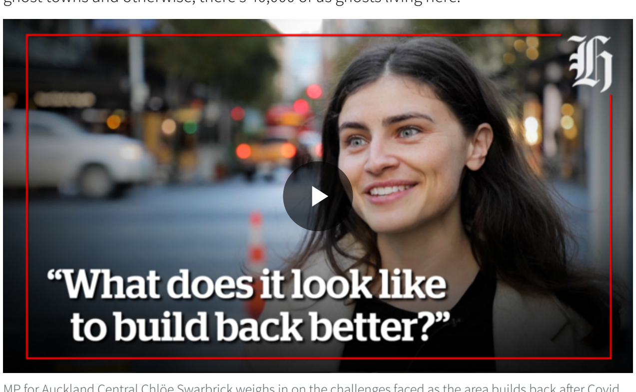

Auckland city centre residents group spokesman Antony Phillips. Photo / Michael Craig

Asked how liveable the city centre is, Phillips says negative commentary isn't hard to find but often stems from those looking in from the outside.

"I think it's more liveable than what a lot of pundits and the commentariat have been suggesting and I do want to draw to your attention that a lot of those people don't live there."

The sentiment is shared by Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick, also a city centre resident.

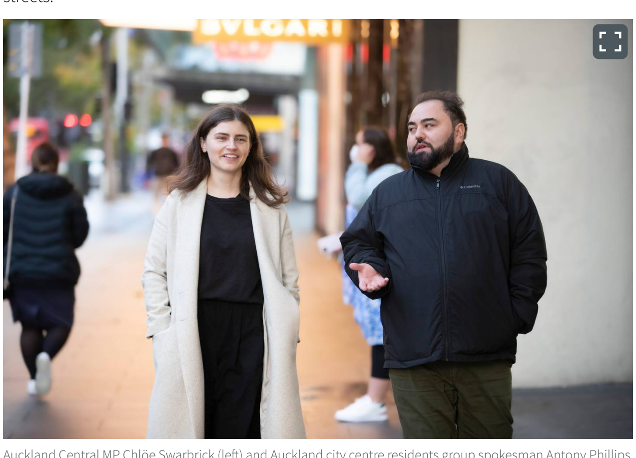
"I don't think many of those in the commentariat are speaking to residents. There are 40,000 people who live here, myself included, so when people bandy about notions of ghost towns and otherwise, there's 40,000 of us ghosts living here."



MP for Auckland Central Chlöe Swarbrick weighs in on the challenges faced as the area builds back after Covid, and what it means to build back better. Video / Michael Craig

However, the pair have grown frustrated with the lack of urgency applied to central Auckland's development, outlined in the City Centre Masterplan.

Finalised in 2012, the plan consists of eight "big ideas" including the revitalisation of the Queen St valley, linking up education facilities and creating networks of green parks and streets.


Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick (left) and Auckland city centre residents group spokesman Antony Phillips are passionate advocates for those who live in Auckland's hub. Photo / Michael Craig

A decade on, Phillips and Swarbrick claim not enough has been done to push the city centre towards becoming a more pedestrian-friendly and culturally enhancing space.

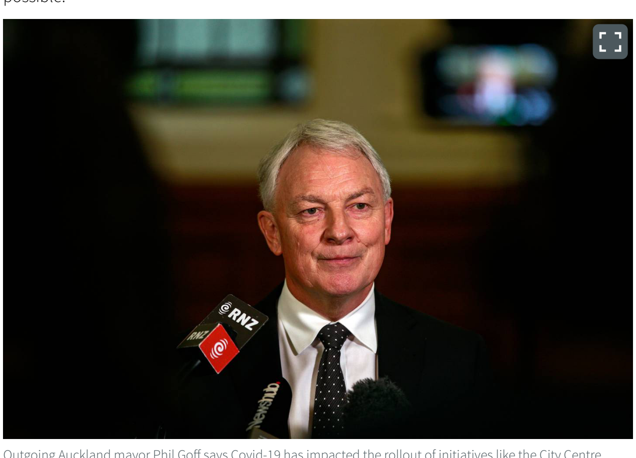
"These things are moving but they're just not moving fast enough," Swarbrick says.

"We don't seem to have a bureaucracy that is oriented towards trying things out and being flexible as it happens."

Outgoing mayor Phil Goff denies the claims, saying Covid's impact on funding has dictated the speed of progress.

"It'd be wrong to say we haven't made huge progress, it'd be equally wrong to say we're [finished], we're not there."

"[Covid has] stolen a whole lot of money out of our budget and yes, I don't like that, but it is what it is and we'll be doing what we can to make the recovery from that as quickly as possible."


Outgoing Auckland mayor Phil Goff says Covid-19 has impacted the rollout of initiatives like the City Centre Masterplan. Photo / Alex Burton

Return of the city centre police station?

Beverley and Phillips are among the local residents who want to see a city centre police station reinstated after the Fort St site was closed in 2013.

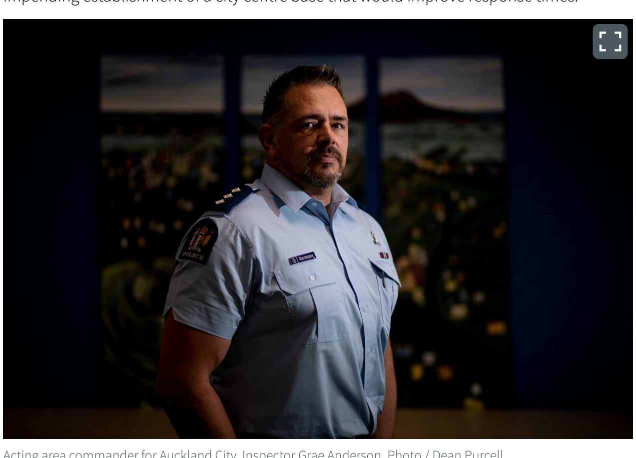
However, the idea has been shot down by acting Auckland City area commander Inspector Grae Anderson, who believes it wouldn't be a smart use of resources.

"If we have a station that is there and manned then we need to have staff in it all the time instead of using our staff, which I think is a far better purpose, to be out there providing prevention, reassurance patrols."

Crime Prevention Group president Sunny Kaushal said there was a 'retail crime emergency' in New Zealand. Video / NZ Herald

Both Swarbrick and Goff agree, arguing the best thing for residents is to have more officers on the beat than behind a desk.

Nevertheless, police are working to enhance their presence in central Auckland with the impending establishment of a city centre base that would improve response times.


Acting area commander for Auckland City, Inspector Grae Anderson. Photo / Dean Purcell

It wouldn't be open to the public as it would chiefly act as an outpost for patrol staff.

"It makes sense that we've got those teams closer to the city centre where they can deploy on foot and in vehicle," Anderson said.

Central Auckland's uptick in crime was largely due to the area's changing demographic during the pandemic, according to Anderson.

Without tourists and international students, some backpackers and motels were being used for emergency accommodation.

The city centre had also become home to some 501s - deportees from Australia named after the policy used to deport them based on character grounds.

Concerning crime trends have prompted more intensive responses from Auckland police. Photo / Hayden Woodward

Anderson said certain 501s, but not all, were dangerous individuals with the potential to influence those without solid support networks.

"So you've got general residents, you've got vulnerable people and you've got people who are willing to leverage off those vulnerabilities and that has the recipe to create, shall we say, a perfect storm."

Gang tensions and drive-by shootings: How did it all begin and where to from here? Video / NZ Herald / Brett Phibbs / Hayden Woodward

Working from home vs the office

Throughout much of the pandemic, working from home became the norm as people did their utmost to dodge the virus while making sure the world kept spinning.

As social restrictions dropped following Covid-19's growing prevalence in New Zealand, companies are left to manage what a normal working week looks like post-pandemic.

There aren't definitive statistics that show how many of the city centre's employees pre-pandemic still work from the office.

Empty offices became commonplace during the pandemic. Photo / Michael Craig

However, what is known is the two industries with the largest presence in the CBD - Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (29.6 per cent) and Financial and Insurance Services (14.9 per cent) - tend to be office-based and may lend themselves to remote working.

According to Auckland Council chief economist Gary Blick, that indicated there could still be a strong contingent yet to return to work in person.

Fewer people in the CBD had flow-on effects for retail and hospitality businesses, evident in the drop in consumer spending.

Auckland Council chief economist Gary Blick. Photo / Bryan Lowe

Despite this, Blick is optimistic market forces will find a balance.

With more office space, Blick anticipates companies could either invest to make their working environments more lucrative, leave them open for newcomers eyeing a spot in the CBD or open the door for redevelopment into residential properties.

"I don't think we should get into assuming that the outlook is grim for the city centre," Blick says.

"I think there's a tendency to magnify current symptoms and assume that represents the future, but it's a location of choice for a number of large firms and there's a reason for that."

Matthew Cockram, chief executive of Britomart developers Cooper and Company. Photo / Supplied

Matthew Cockram, chief executive of Britomart developers Cooper and Company, says companies are going through a "transition phase" in determining working arrangements.

To encourage people to come into the CBD, Cockram says he and other landowners have employed more security, in the hope it preserves a safe and secure atmosphere for their employees and the wider public.

"What it really means for us as a landlord is we have to really work hard on creating an attractive and alluring environment for people to come into."

City centre education

As more families become accustomed to city centre life, the need for education grows.

Swarbrick is a vocal proponent of this and has consistently engaged with the Ministry of Education for the past two years regarding land acquisition for a city centre primary school.

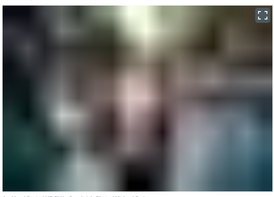
The city centre fell in the ministry's Auckland Grammar-Western Springs catchment, which spanned from Pt Chevalier to the west, Epsom to the south and Meadowbank to the east.

The Grammar catchment needs a new primary school as more families move into the city centre. Photo / NZME

According to the area's education growth plan, an additional 2693 school-aged students will need to be accommodated by 2030.

Between 2023 and 2030, the plan says "potential acquisition of land for a new primary school in the CBD" is key to managing that growth.

It also says post-2030, a primary school should be established, as well as a "city centre secondary school and co-ed option".



Auckland Central MP Chloe Swarbrick. Photo / Michael Craig

Despite offering potential sites to the ministry, Swarbrick says her suggestions are often rebuffed due to excessive costs, which she disputes.

"The point that I've consistently made to the ministry is that with these amazing infrastructure projects like the City Rail Link, I don't see those prices of land going down any time soon, so now is the time to make that investment."

A ministry spokesperson said sites for a new state primary school were being considered however, it was believed the demand for the Year 7–15 student group could be met without an additional secondary school in the network.

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