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## Auckland Council quits Local Government NZ: LGNZ chief executive refutes Wayne Brown's claims of a 'boozy' conference in the Bay of Islands

By Benjamin Plummer

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Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown told Newstalk ZB's Mike Hosking this morning that he was determined to fix the issue of many road cones covering routes across the city. Video / Newstalk ZB ...

Local Government New Zealand's (LGNZ) chief executive has hit back at Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown's claims of seeing hundreds of members "getting pissed all night long" at its conferences.

5th y, Brown said as a banjo-playing member of a band that had played at a LGNZ conference in the Bay of Islands, he had watched hundreds of members "dancing and

**getting pissed all night long for no benefit to ratepayers”.**

He claimed this was part of the reason he pulled Auckland Council out of the LGNZ on Thursday.

Today, however, LGNZ's CEO Susan Freeman-Greene told the *Herald* in a statement: “LGNZ has never held its annual conference in the Bay of Islands”.

“LGNZ annual conferences include strategic discussions on local government issues of the day, workshops, expert speakers, access to politicians, professional development, connection to decision makers and networking,” Freeman-Greene said.

She also rebutted Brown's claims that the conferences were boozy.

“They consistently receive positive feedback from people who attend for these reasons. They are the only event that brings all of local government and its stakeholders together,” Freeman-Greene said.

LGNZ is a representative group for local government across Aotearoa and provides advocacy and support for local councils.

Brown used his casting vote to pass the measure after the vote was split 10:10 at yesterday's governing body.

As part of the drive to cut costs in this year's budget, Brown put up the motion for the council to cancel its membership of LGNZ, which, he said, was costing about \$640,000 a year.

Freeman-Greene, however, said the cost of LGNZ membership for Auckland was just over \$350,000 for 2022/23

Auckland Council's membership was 4 per cent of LGNZ's operating income in 2022/23, yet the organisation claims to be in a strong financial position and will continue to deliver its full range of services and value to members.

Brown told Newstalk ZB's Heather Du Plessis-Allan last night that Auckland Council's withdrawal would mean job losses at LGNZ and added, “I'm going to have to fire staff because my previous council gave me a really bad day when I arrived and found I was \$295m in the poo.”

Freeman-Greene said as a result of Brown's decision, Auckland ratepayers stood to lose \$1 million a year in savings when the council was no longer part of a LGNZ street-light-dimming programme.

"Developing this profile has taken three years and has been a highly technical project. It has been tried before. We estimate it would take Auckland two to three years to develop its own profile. During that period, Auckland is set to miss out more than \$3 million through this programme," she said.

Brown said Auckland Council would have more power alone rather than staying with LGNZ.

"It [LGNZ] makes it very easy for the Minister of Local Government to talk to all the mayors. They get the mayors in Wellington for a meeting and the Minister wanders in, chats with the room, leaves - and says 'well, that's consultation done with the local government sector,'" Brown said.

"I've always felt that if you're on your own, they [government] have to come and see us."

P This is not the first time Brown has withdrawn his council from the LGNZ. In 2008, he withdrew the Far North District Council from the peak body while he was mayor.

"The mayor's own council overturned that decision within 12 months," Freeman-Greene said.

Freeman-Greene said LGNZ was heavily involved in setting up the Local Government Funding authority (LGFA).

"Our Chief Executive at the time was a key player in the steering group and LGNZ was instrumental in getting sector and government support. This was but one good example through this initiative of our very strong convening role in this initiative, to the benefit of communities and ratepayers," she said.

Auckland will now lose out when the Government wants input on issues affecting councils, warned Freeman-Greene.

"When governments ask for local government input into taskforces that workshop policy, they come to LGNZ, not individual councils.

**"LGNZ plays a strong convening role between local and central government," she said.**

The mayor's office has been approached for comment by the *Herald* about Freeman-Greene's comments today.

Stuart Crosby, LGNZ President, said the organisation was disappointed at the move, saying Auckland ratepayers will have to "pick up the bill".

"It's really disappointing that the mayor has used his casting vote to leave LGNZ," Crosby said. "The irony of cost savings now means Auckland ratepayers will now have to pick up the bill.

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