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If Auckland is a 'city of culture' why is Wayne Brown cutting the arts budgets? - Simon Wilson

By Simon Wilson 14 Mar, 2023 05:00 AM 7 mins to read



Mayor Wayne Brown (right) at the opening of the Light From Tate exhibition at Toi o Tamaki Auckland Art Gallery with (from left) gallery director Kirsten Lacey, Toi o Tamaki Auckland Unlimited acting chairwoman Jen Rolfe and assistant curator at Tate Gallery, London, Matthew Watts.

OPINION On December 21 last year, Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown declared Auckland a "City of Culture". Good to know.

A week earlier, he had made his budget intentions clear: there would be across-the-board cuts in community and arts funding. Brown specifically criticised the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki for its staff of "122 people looking after a few paintings in a building that nobody goes to" and its collection of "not New Zealand pictures".

This month, Brown spoke at the opening of the gallery's big new touring show Light from Tate. Supporters of the gallery had worked hard to get him there and he made a point of saying he had "enjoyed learning more" about what the gallery does. He implied he had been converted. Also good to know.

Then he said, "I would like to take a moment to address some misconceptions that have been circulating on my stance on council expenditure on the arts. There seems to be a false perception that I am threatening to cut funding for the arts, which is not true."

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But it is true. As Brown explained it, funding for all community sectors, not just the arts, is "under review". His draft budget, out for public consultation until March 28, proposes cuts of something close to \$100 million in funding for events, communities and the arts in the 2023/24 year, which starts on July 1. Rates will also rise, although by less than inflation.

Brown also told the gallery notables, by way of pressing his arts credentials, that the giant sculptures on entrepreneur Alan Gibbs's farm at Kaiwaka are held up by his engineering. Is that relevant to anything? The Gibbs farm is a private sculpture park, almost never open to the public, and not in receipt of public funds.

What will the arts and community services cuts mean?

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Northart is a publicly funded art gallery in the Northcote Shopping Centre, operating out of council premises just next to the library. It's a not-for-profit and has been going for 25 years as the only public gallery on the North Shore serving local artists.

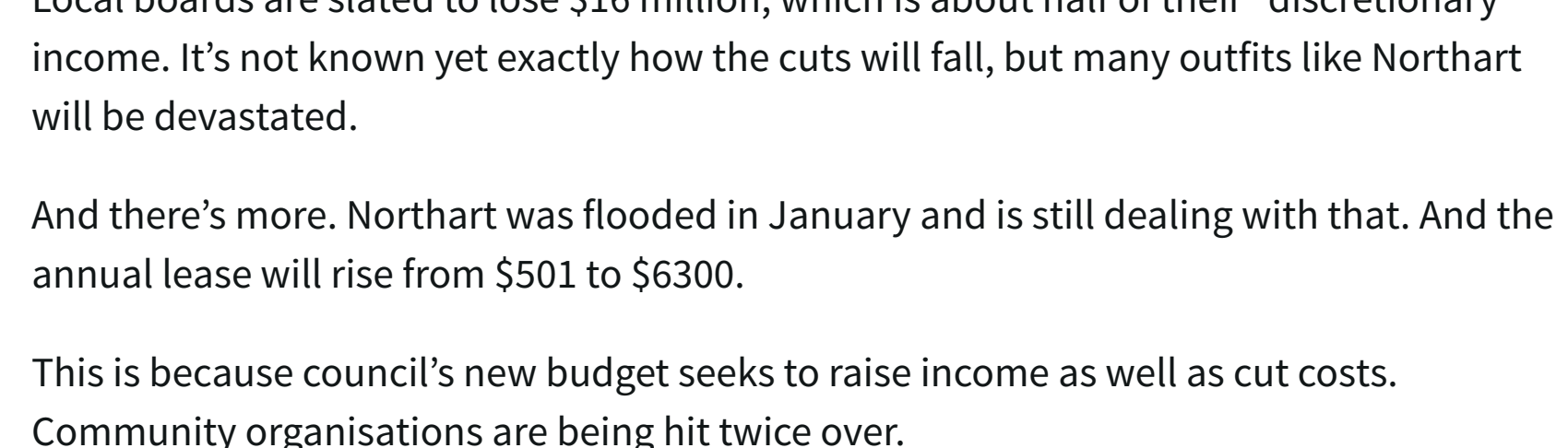
It curates a rolling series of exhibitions, sells work for a small commission, holds talks and symposiums, provides arts resources to local schools and hosts shows of high-school students' work too.

Funding comes from the Kaipatiki Local Board and the Birkenhead Licensing Trust. Jessica Fearless, the co-director, says the board has told them the board will have to cut between 5 and 50 per cent of its allocation.

Local boards are slated to lose \$16 million, which is about half of their "discretionary" income. It's not known yet exactly how the cuts will fall, but many outfits like Northart will be devastated.

And there's more. Northart was flooded in January and is still dealing with that. And the annual lease will rise from \$501 to \$6300.

This is because council's new budget seeks to raise income as well as cut costs. Community organisations are being hit twice over.



Mayor Wayne Brown, now a self-confessed convert to the cause of the Auckland Art Gallery. Photo / Michael Craig

Could the licensing trust or other charities pick up the slack? Fearless says they'll give it their best shot, they always do, but she's not hopeful. "The funding pool from organisations like Foundation North, the trusts, Creative New Zealand, all the other groups, it's hugely oversubscribed."

There's not nearly enough money in the system and, for small entities, every little bit matters.

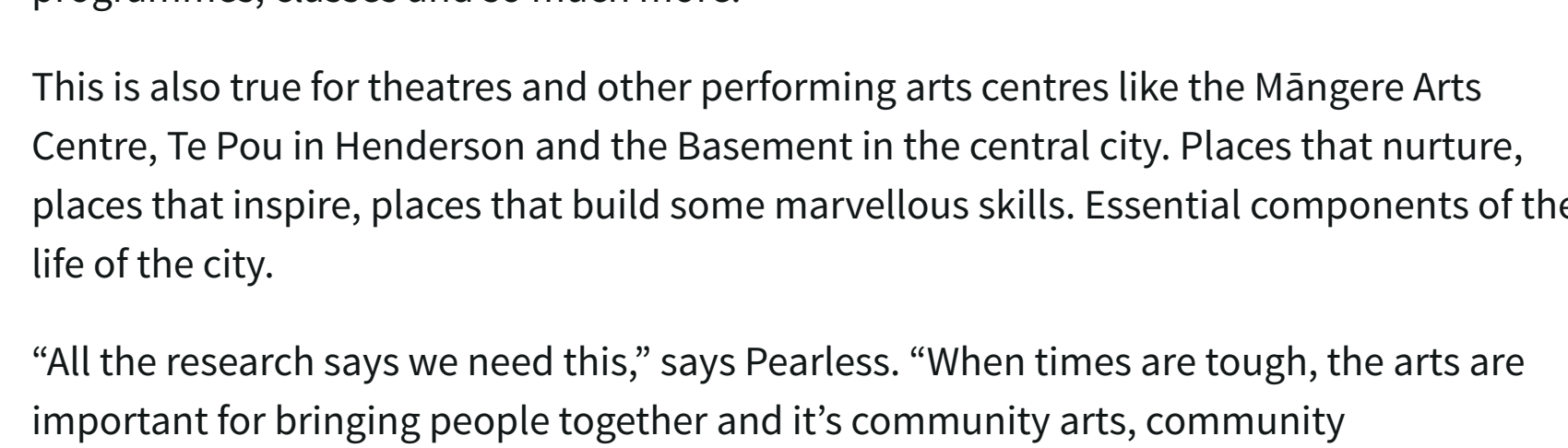
There are public galleries similar to Northart in many parts of Auckland. Some, like Te Tuhi in Pakuranga and Te Uru in Titirangi, are bigger. Some are tiny. All of them serve local communities with exhibitions, education and outreach programmes, youth programmes, classes and so much more.

This is also true for theatres and other performing arts centres like the Māngere Arts Centre, Te Pahi in Henderson and the Basement in the central city. Places that nurture, places that inspire, places that build some marvellous skills. Essential components of the life of the city.

"All the research says we need this," says Fearless. "When times are tough, the arts are important for bringing people together and it's community arts, community organisations, that do it."

Council's strategy with its budget cuts is to spread the load widely. Although not universally: golf courses, for example, remain untouched and the mayor's own office has been spending heavily on consultants. But, by and large, most council costs are being "trimmed".

Brown has promised that popular events like the Lantern Festival, Diwali and Pasifika will not be cancelled, but what he doesn't say is that they could be scaled back.



The play Savage Coloniser, part of the Auckland Arts Festival that opened last weekend.

The valuable "not New Zealand pictures" the AAG acquires from time to time won't be affected, because they're endowments from private donors, not bought with public funds. But the cuts will still hurt the gallery, along with other large arts organisations like the Auckland Philharmonia and the Auckland Theatre Company. They'll do less educational work and put on fewer shows. Their community outreach will suffer.

If you think the arts are elitist, remember that. The elite look after themselves; everyone else shoulders the load.

For smaller outfits with few resources, a "trim" could mean they have to close altogether. "And," says Fearless, "when something closes, it doesn't usually come back."

Council wants to know what citizens think about all this. They really do. They know their cuts will cause harm and they are looking for public guidance on how to do the least damage. If you care, go to the council website and fill in a form or find a public engagement session you can attend near you.

Brown puts it this way: "If nobody notices and nobody complains, it was probably the right thing to do."

That's so often not true: the loudness of a complaint is an extremely unreliable guide to its validity. People who miss out, over and over, are less likely to protest than those whose sense of entitlement is offended.

Related: The art gallery did brilliantly to seduce Brown into opening its new exhibition. He knows, now, much more about the value of that institution. His office tells me he also attended Te Matatini.

But he didn't go to Polyfest, where 181 groups from 55 schools put the creative diversity of the city on display last week. He hasn't been to anything in the Auckland Arts Festival, which has just had a magnificent opening weekend. Pasifika is apparently not in his diary for this weekend.

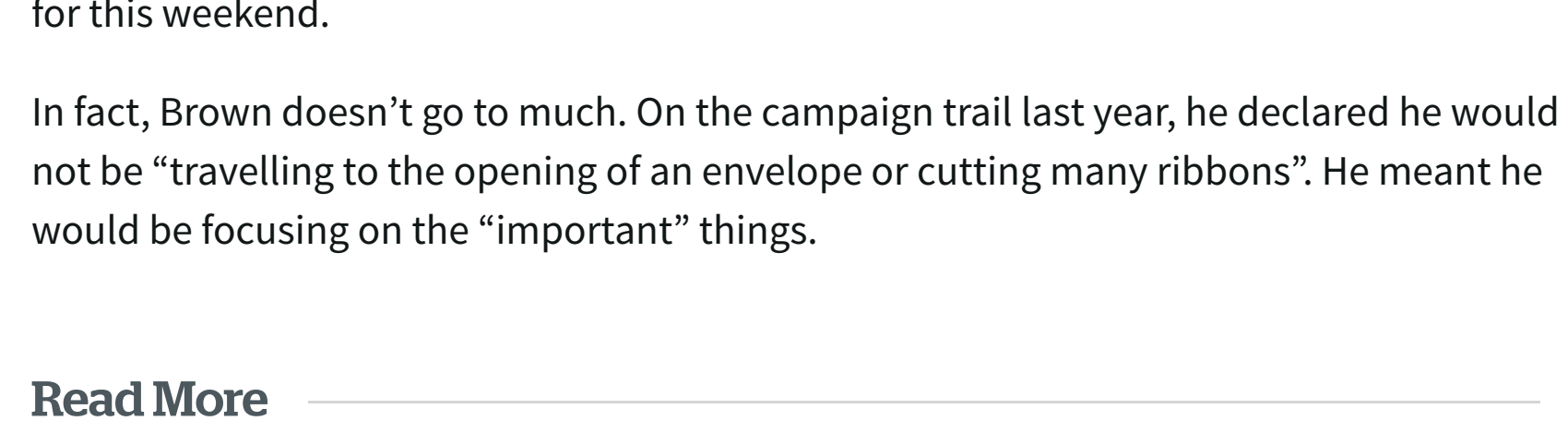
In fact, Brown doesn't go to much. On the campaign trail last year, he declared he would not be "travelling to the opening of an envelope or cutting many ribbons". He meant he would be focusing on the "important" things.

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What it really means is that he's not coming to your community fair and he doesn't want to meet your stallholders, performers, local leaders or any of the other people who glue your community together. What it really means is that he lacks curiosity about the city itself.

Needless to say, he's never been to Northart.



Don McGlashan, who appeared in the Music in Parks programme in Pakuranga last Saturday. Photo / Diane Smithers

Don McGlashan played in Lloyd Elmore Park in Pakuranga last weekend. The free concert was part of Music in Parks, now in its 45th year with 17 concerts featuring 60 artists this summer. There are three shows still to come in Papatoetoe, Favona and Pukekohe.

A \$20 million cut to regional services will probably wipe out Music in Parks, along with many other programmes. The \$16 million local board cuts will affect libraries. A \$3 million cut to contestable regional grants will eliminate all the available money small local groups can apply for.

And on it goes. As Jessica Fearless says, once these things are gone, how do we get them back?

And if you want to be an economic brutalist about it, how do you think the city will attract talent if it is not looking after the hearts and souls - and the entertainment thrills - of its citizens?

A city of culture? Prove it.

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