

‘A wall of water hit us’

TAKITIMU Marae chair Wikitoria Hauraki recalls the days prior to the flooding and their flooding experience on Waihirere Road, February 14, 2023 and what is in store for them next . . .

“IT was not just Raupunga, Wairoa was left on its own in the wake of Gabrielle.”

The Waihirere Road resident knew as soon as the flooding hit that no-one was coming immediately.

“There was no siren apart from Michelle McIlroy’s voice at about 6.30am. If not for her, you would not have known water was coming.

“It was a wall of water that hit us — from the showgrounds and across the paddocks.

“Some of the water was coming down the road straight towards us.

“I was thinking that the water that was coming down the road was ‘a bit slow, we might be OK’, but then I turned around and saw the wall coming. ‘That’s us’, I said to myself.

“It reached the top of our fences; there was a roar and it was moving at a ferocious speed.

“The marae football paddock was getting ready to be cut for hay, but by the time the water had receded, it was as if it had been mown already.”

Her whānau asked, “what do we do?”

“I said, ‘we just have to hold’.

“We got out of the house and some of us were standing on chairs.

“It was the speed that it rose at.

“We realised we could not get across to our neighbours to ask if they were OK. It was about 8.30am by that point.

“Farmers like Darren Hill, who also came to help us in Bola, knew what to do. They knew they needed to get here quickly and Darren came with his son.

“He came up the drive to evacuate us. At that time, the water was up to our backs.

“He knew the geography of where people were and the drains which you could not see now.

“That was not his first rodeo.

“At the corner of Waihirere Road, we saw a dingy with an outboard motor and others on board.

“Darren advised them who was still in their homes and who did not want to leave their animals — right from the top house of Waihirere Road down.”

Ms Hauraki and her whānau of four, including a mother-to-be, headed to Taihoa Marae.

Thinking back to the day before the flooding, she had tried to prepare Takitimu Marae.

“I requested sandbags for the marae and I was told there were none left and that we could fill our own.

“After leaving Taihoa later the next day, we came across the bridge, and I looked down Marine Parade at 6pm and I saw sandbags.

“I thought ‘well, that is where the priorities are’, but we knew that North Clyde was the one in danger.”

Even before the expected release of the Hawke’s Bay Emergency Civil Defence review by Mike Bush next month, Ms Hauraki was disappointed that before the cyclone hit, there did not appear to be a civil defence emergency plan that made use of the networks established during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“We look forward to the inquiry regarding the performance of the

emergency services and civil defence.

“One of my strong recommendations was regarding the utilisation of the community organisations, iwi and hapu that were so successful during the pandemic.

“For Taiwhenua, Kahungunu Executive, Enabled Wairoa, Te Whare Maire o Tapuae, Tātau Tātau and the seven kāhui, Hinemihi Marae to work alongside and to provide a more efficient emergency service regarding an evacuation plan.

“The outcome for some of us, particularly in North Clyde, and how we viewed the Gabrielle response was that we could not rely on the likes of civil defence or some of the emergency services after we were left on our own in the wake of Gabrielle.

“Our own mayor Craig Little and deputy mayor Denise Karekare-Eaglesome tried really hard to get things moving, however we were all cut off in our own ways.

“Craig got around all the homes and marae to see how we were getting on.

“The communications went down everywhere.

“We should always have a plan ready. If we fail to plan, we plan to fail.

“A lot of these North Clyde residents have decided because they were left on their own, they would have to look after themselves and form their own plan.”

After the Hawke’s Bay Emergency Civil Defence review, Ms Hauraki would be interested to look at the feedback from the inquiry, “and how that will help us in the future to respond next time”.

“A year on, the focus remains getting back into our own homes and rebuilding our marae at Takitimu and Tawhiti-a-Maru.

“It will be a long process, and I hope there will be some fairness in the response for our marae.

“On the business-side of town, they were looked after, but it felt like ‘now we know where the priority is and it is not us’.

“We know that because of the experience with the sandbags and the delayed response in coming to get us.

“It was a farmer who rallied his resources to come and rescue us.

“There were a couple of them who said they had been to the council and were told to go to North Clyde.

“Marae need their own Starlinks as a part of a rescue area in any emergency.

“For North Clyde, we felt forgotten about and it felt in those first six to eight hours that we were not the priority.

“Once we got to Taihoa Marae and the civil defence marae, we were able to get out bearings and awhi to that whānau at Taihoa.

“The absence of an evacuation plan is another lesson.

“It could have been communicated in The Wairoa Star on that Thursday before.

“We all had prior knowledge of the cyclone coming. It was well-known.

“That’s why I was thinking ‘are you for real?’ when they told me I was over-reacting.

“Was there ever a plan?

“They have planned a remembrance.

“Next time, we need a well-communicated evacuation cyclone response plan, and that should be a priority alongside a flooding mitigation plan, which has a lot to do with the categorisation risk in Wairoa.”

The Waihirere Road resident knew as soon as the flooding hit that no one was coming immediately.

Chance to grow back stronger

A YEAR on from the cyclone, the scars are still there to see, says Quality Roding Services chief executive officer Jeremy Harker.

“That initial reaction and response with the cleaning up is done. Now the council and Transport Rebuild East Coast (TREC) need to get the roads usable again and focus their projects on flood protection.

“We are a long way off as the major rains throughout that year have delayed our ability to get projects done.”

It was not all doom and gloom, however.

“When you drive to either Napier or Gisborne, you can see, as a community, we have come a long way.”

He believes clear communication is needed in order to move forward.

“It is really important to know what the solutions are.

“Waikare Bridge — what is the solution there? A known plan for the Devil’s Elbow would need to look at the bigger picture — not just a case of widening the road, because there has to be a better route than the Devil’s Elbow.”

Other challenges include deciding on a solution and plan for Morere Hill, and a plan for SH38 as that is the only western access route between Napier and Ōpōtiki.

“The road up at Tuai is unsealed and that needs to be in better condition because of the impact on the community with health, access and welfare.

“Out near Blacks Beach and Māhia, you have a billion-dollar rocket industry and an important local community relying on a highly vulnerable road.”

The \$70 million that has been ring-fenced for Wairoa’s flood protection is only the beginning. “That figure does not go far so there will be hard decisions made on how the science is robust and you can trust it, not everybody will be 100 percent in agreement.

“Last year’s experiences have shown the consequences of the lack of flood protection and its inability to cope, our isolation through road closures and the ongoing housing problems in Wairoa.

“There are positives though, with solutions put forward by Tātou Tātou and Enabled Wairoa with housing.”

How the company handled the aftermath

fills Mr Harker with pride.

“The first five days you had to deal with what you were seeing in front of you and take a step back to see the bigger picture.

“When there is a significant event, having that equipment in known critical areas is vital. There were limited communications for the crews going out, they knew the ‘what’ and ‘why’ but the ‘how’ is built on their experiences and trusting those experiences.

“I was really proud of how our people did that and handled it. It was about rolling with the continuous information changes: you’d be going out to one place then another based on information at the time, but then an hour later, it would change.

“As time goes on, you get clearer information.

“It is also important to remember that we weren’t doing it by ourselves — it was a collective effort from established local contractors, individual contractors, outside contractors, our local community volunteers, council, whānau and emergency services.

“Everyone wanted to help the Wairoa community impacted by Gabrielle.”

As a company, more personnel, strong finances and their move into the new building suggests a bright future for the council-owned company.

“We now employ 130 people this year — up from 100 this time last year. The traffic management and the operational side has grown. Finances and revenue are strong and what is good for QRS, is good for the Wairoa community.

“Funding from central government and work cycles that money circulating through Wairoa so the funding dollars goes further and we can give back to our owners who are the ratepayers.

“The new building allowed us to have the one place to coordinate everything and guide us for what to do and what to prioritise.”

There is light at the end of the tunnel for the rohe. “It has been a long process, most of the silt is gone and the rest of the roads are open. I see more positives than negatives. This is an opportunity for Wairoa to come back better and stronger, which I am quietly confident about.”

Tackling rural crime

POLICE are urging victims of rural crime to come forward and report incidents.

Police officers say if rural crime was reported more, it would help them prevent future incidents.

A Federated Farmers survey shows rising rates of rural crime which is driving their demand for more rural police resourcing.

Tuai constable Tony Maultsaid says everything needs to be reported.

“There is the thought that ‘police cannot do anything, so why bother?’ But we would like to know about it because it could relate to a separate incident and help to join some pieces of the puzzle together.”

Mr Mault said he does believe there has been a small increase in rural crime, but says it is not anything to worry about.

“Certainly there is a rise in illegal poaching on properties without the owner’s permission.

“The number of deer in Wairoa is growing and there are not too many places that do not have deer on them now.”

Wairoa Police senior sergeant Maui Aben says Wairoa has had its share of rural crime.

“Despite that, we are not aware of our area being over-represented in terms of rural crime.

“It is not appropriate for us to comment about data in a survey not commissioned by Police, but I note that at a national level, Police have been in touch with Federated Farmers to discuss the findings and work together on improving outcomes for rural victims of crime.”

The national manager for rural policing, David Martin, says rural police officers regularly engage with farmers.

He says feedback like the survey provides more information to help police understand the challenges farmers are facing.

“We know that rural crime is under-reported. There are many reasons for this, and it’s not a new issue — nor is it unique to New Zealand.”

While it is known to police that rural areas are a target for criminals, Mr Martin says it is hard to get an accurate picture of how rural crime is tracking.

“That is why it is so important that people tell us when there is suspicious or illegal activity happening. When you make a report, we are able to see where crime is happening, where our attention needs to be.

“It gives us a valuable picture of where crime is occurring, what is being targeted, and it gives us the opportunity to act.”

A 2023 Federated Farmers Rural Crime Survey with over 1000 respondents showed that 67 percent of farmers said they had experienced a criminal incident in the last two years.

It was a 14 percent increase from the 2021 survey and a 26 percent rise from the first survey in 2016.

The number of surveyed farmers reporting a single incident of crime (or a suspected incident in the case of hard to trace crimes such as theft of livestock) fell from 28 percent in 2021 to 19 percent in 2023.

But those who experienced two or more incidents in the past two years increased from 71 percent to 81 percent.