



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 21 January 2026**

### **People Power on the Spit**

#### **Mangawhai Commemorates 35 Years Since the Historic "Big Dig"**

**MANGAWHAI, NZ** – February 11, 2026, marks the 35th anniversary of the Mangawhai 'Big Dig', a legendary act of community grit that rescued a dying waterway from environmental collapse. In February 1991, locals famously bypassed bureaucratic paralysis to perform a feat of engineering that remains the cornerstone of Mangawhai's identity.

#### **The Crisis**

The decline began in 1978 when a violent storm tore a 450-metre breach through the southern end of Mangawhai's iconic sandspit. This catastrophic break diverted tidal flow, causing the harbour entrance to choke.

Cyclone Bola delivered the final blow in 1988; within two years, the harbour mouth was completely closed, while the southern gap had become a shallow, treacherous hazard. With its circulation cut off, the once vibrant harbour lagoon became a "stagnant graveyard." Faced with institutional inertia, a band of locals - the **"Big Dig Rebels"** - refused to let their waterway die. Choosing direct action over red tape, they took to the sands to breathe life back into the harbour.

#### **The 1991 Rescue Operation**

- **The Dawn Convoy:** At 6:00 AM on February 11, 1991, a convoy of over 40 heavy machines - bulldozers, excavators, and scrapers - descended upon the sandspit to carve a new path for the tide.
- **Four Days of Determination:** Working around the clock and tides, hundreds of locals successfully carved a 30-metre-wide channel and reopened the harbour entrance, restoring the vital tidal flow required to flush the lagoon.
- **The Closure:** In the following weeks, the operation evolved into a massive engineering feat to close the rogue southern breach. Locals were joined by 20

personnel from the Papakura Military Camp - who were training in Mangawhai at the time and volunteered their support - to hand-fill and place 5,000 sandbags. This formed the stable foundation upon which heavy machinery constructed the initial sand bund wall.

- **Restoring Protection:** Simultaneously, a burgeoning partnership began to form; Northland Regional Council provided machinery and rock, enabling Mangawhai locals to rebuild the critical Rock Groyne at the harbour mouth to protect the reopened entrance.

### Triumph of Community Spirit

Led by the grit of **Gary Berghan, Noel Cullen, Torchy Jeffery, Jim Wintle, Richard Bull** and others working behind the scenes, the Big Dig remains a symbol of defiance. It was a total town effort: while the "Rebels" worked without legal consents - facing the threat of arrest and ruinous fines - virtually every other household formed the operation's backbone. From driving machinery to contributing to a community-led legal defence fund, it was a landmark victory of "people power" over red tape.

### A Lasting Legacy

The momentum from the Big Dig led to the formation of **Mangawhai Harbour Restoration Society (MHSR)**. To transition from a "rebel" action to a permanent solution, pre-imminent coastal engineer **Andre LaBonte** offered his help. Working alongside global expert **Professor Bob Dean**, LaBonte developed the scientific and engineering roadmap that made the restoration sustainable and legally compliant - transforming a community protest into a world-class environmental project.

MHSR now serves as the primary guardian of the harbour's delicate equilibrium. "We pay tribute to the tenacious Rebels," says **Peter Wethey, Chair of MHSR**. "Everything we enjoy today exists because this community refused to take 'no' for an answer. That rescue mission has now matured into a sophisticated partnership of stewardship and kaitiakitanga."

Today, MHSR works closely with **Te Uri o Hau, local and regional councils, DOC and Mangawhai Matters**. Their focus is guided by rigorous scientific monitoring; recent landmark drone surveys revealed a staggering loss of more than **420,000 tonnes of sand** from the spit in just six years. This "coastal starvation" - equivalent to **26,000 dump trucks** worth of sand - has left the spit critically thin, with experts warning of a high prospect of another breach within 15 years.

"By protecting the sandspit, ensuring vital tidal flow and managing mangrove encroachment for a healthy harbour, we preserve a thriving waterway for boaters, fishers and families, while providing a sanctuary for the endangered tara iti (fairy tern) and other at-risk wildlife," says Peter.

## Commemorative Events

On 21 February, MHRS is hosting an invite-only 35th Anniversary event at Mangawhai Museum to honour the original Rebels. Public opportunities to engage with this history include:

- **Mangawhai Museum:** View the Big Dig documentary and the "Storm Zone" exhibition.
- **Literature:** 'They Dared the Impossible' by historian Beverley C. Ross is available at the Museum.
- **Mangawhai Art Gallery:** "On The Same Tide" exhibition (7–19 February), a curated collection of local artwork celebrating the beauty of the ocean, vitality of the harbour and rhythms of the land.

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## MEDIA CONTACTS

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## NOTES TO EDITORS Interview Opportunities:

- **Peter Wethey:** Chair, MHRS (On the harbour's future and ongoing restoration).
- **Richard Bull (MNZM):** Original Big Dig Rebel (On the frontline action and legal risks).
- **Beverley Ross:** Local historian and author (On the historical significance).

## Visual Assets:

- Archival 1991 photos of the Big Dig available upon request.
- **Photo Ops:** Interviews can be staged at the Sandspit, by the estuary, on the 'Spirit of Mangawhai II' Dredger, or at the Feb 21 event.