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Mangawhai Celebrates the Pioneers Who Saved the Harbour: 35th Anniversary of the "Big Dig"

MANGAWHAI – On Saturday, 21 February, Mangawhai Harbour Restoration Society (MHRS) and guests gathered at Mangawhai Museum for an emotional celebration marking 35 years since the historic 1991 "Big Dig."

The event was a tribute to the "Big Dig Rebels" - the 100+ volunteers and their 40+ machines who, on 11 February 1991, staged a historic intervention to reopen the harbour. Several of the original Rebels, along with many others who worked tirelessly to save the harbour over the decades that followed, were present to receive a long round of applause from the community.

Society Chair **Peter Wethey** spoke of the deep connection between the town and its waterway. "We are gathered here surrounded by history, but the most important story of Mangawhai isn't found in a display case; it's written in the tides just outside that door," said Wethey. "To the original Rebels and those who laboured through that first decade - you secured a future for all of us."

Distinguished guests in attendance included Northland Regional Council Chair **Pita Tipene** and Kaipara District Council Mayor **Jonathan Larsen**, both of whom addressed the gathering to acknowledge the community's extraordinary legacy of stewardship.

The night featured a poignant address from **Richard Bull**, a lifelong guardian of the harbour who recently received a New Year's Honour for his service. Mr Bull, whose family farm once included Mangawhai Sandspit, spoke to guests about the grit and long-term dedication required to maintain the waterway's pulse. A special tribute was also paid to the late **Gary Berghan**, one of the three original Big Dig Rebel leaders, who passed away on 6 February this year.

The Crisis (1978–1991)

The harbour reached a crisis point following the 1978 storm that tore a 600-metre breach through the Mangawhai Sandspit, and the subsequent impact of Cyclone Bola. The harbour mouth choked with sand, halting the vital tidal flow and turning the harbour into a "stagnant graveyard" with a dying ecosystem, while the breach became treacherous and nearly

unnavigable. Spearheaded by leaders **Gary Berghan, Noel Cullen** and **Torchy Jeffery**, the Rebels worked without consents to carve a small new channel and temporarily reopen the harbour entrance, in just four days.

From Intervention to Stability

The 1991 rescue was the catalyst for decades of stewardship. Following the initial "Big Dig," dedicated locals laboured under challenging conditions using old dredge machinery to keep the water moving. With Council support, they rebuilt the rock groyne at the entrance, and by 1995, formal Resource Consents for were granted. The dredged sand was repurposed into permanent bund wall. On 29 June 1996, officially closed the "rogue" breach and established the stable inlet the community enjoys today.

The Road Ahead

While celebrating this legacy, MHRS highlighted the urgent reality facing the harbour. LiDAR surveys revealed the sandspit has lost 420,000 tonnes of sand in the past six years, posing a high risk of a major breach within 15 years. Wethey emphasised that protecting the harbour now requires a holistic, catchment-wide approach to ensure long-term resilience.

"A healthy harbour depends on more than just an open entrance," says Wethey. "We must recognise that riparian planting, sediment control and controlled urban development are essential to protecting our waters from the hills to the sea." To manage this, the Society reaffirmed its commitment to its "Four Pillars of Guardianship" - Spit Stabilisation, Revegetation, Strategic Dredging and Ecological Balance.

Grant McCallum, MP for Northland, noted in a message: "The Big Dig Rebels showed what happens when people refuse to let bureaucracy stand in the way of protecting their own backyard. That spirit is still very much alive today."

For more information on the history and ongoing work of the society, visit [Mangawhai Harbour Restoration Society](#).

[Note to Editor: Infographic "The Guardians of the Harbour" attached separately]

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