

Scientist makes mayoral move

Kathy Forsyth
Chief reporter

VICTOR Luca speaks three languages, is a scientist who has worked in major organisations overseas and calls himself an “eco warrior”. He also wants to be Whakatane’s next mayor.

Dr Luca was born in and attended St Joseph’s and Whakatane High schools, before obtaining his PhD from Victoria University. He has worked overseas since that time as a research scientist or leader, in the United States, Australia and Argentina in universities and government organisations, including the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation in Sydney and the Comision Nacional de Energia Atomica in Buenos Aires.

He returned to Whakatane in March this year, although his wife, an Argentinian, is still back there with their two children who have just started university.

He had returned to the Eastern Bay partly for family matters, he said. His parents are getting older. His dad is 87. People will know their name; his father and uncles owned The Lyric restaurant for 36 years and the family has deep roots in the town. His mum worked at Pattersons fashion store for more than 25 years.

“I always had a hankering to come back. I have got 10 years of working life ahead of me and I would like to make a contribution here and make my life here.”

“I have come here looking for work; I have always had political interests and when I saw that the mayor’s position was going, I said, ‘why not?’”

He knows his background in science is unusual for someone running for mayor, or council (he is standing in the Ohope-Whakatane ward), but he has some valuable skills and knowledge that he will bring to council chambers.

Whakatane is still the little jewel he remembers as a kid. It has not changed all that much, many of the buildings in The Strand have been there for more than 60 years, he said. What is expected to change, he said, was the climate.

“I have got a significant interest in renewable energy and waste management; I guess you could call me an environmental warrior.”

His work and research has included radioactive waste management and nuclear chemistry.

“Nuclear technology generates waste, which needs to be dealt with in similar fashion to municipal waste. Part of my mission was to develop technology for improving the treatment and conditioning and disposal of those sorts of



CONTENDER: Dr Victor Luca has returned to Whakatane after working overseas for many years and hopes to become the town’s next mayor.

Photo Troy Baker D8776-04

wastes, and also developing materials for removing heavy metals from water or removing other toxic agents.

“Our latest work was the extraction of uranium from sea water.”

He has also worked on other projects, including electrodes for Li-ion batteries and for capturing the sun’s light and converting it into hydrogen gas for use in clean energy.

“The way I see it, climate change is real, anthropogenic climate change is real.”

He said that a recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report indicates that we have 12 years to act in order to keep warming to below 1.5 degrees. In New Zealand, this will result in water stress, and for our area, storms and flooding is expected to become more common.

“My angle is to build in some resistance, we need to be prepared for whatever happens ... it will be immoral of us to do nothing. I think I have lot to contribute in that field.”

“Whakatane district is vulnerable. We have seen the results of flooding, if we are going to get more of them then we need to do something about it. It worries me that we are not well provided for in terms of escape routes. We have one bridge, built in the year I was born, 1961.

“I think a second bridge is essential, I mean you can’t even get out over the bridge at five o’clock in the afternoon. Research is required, but trying to get a bridge for Whakatane would be one of my priorities, if we are really interested

in building resilience and preparedness in the town.”

Dr Luca said making arguments for public funding was what he had done for decades and he would use those skills here.

“But I also have 20 years of public service governance. I have been running projects in the public service setting for 20 years. I know how to prepare and evaluate tenders and so forth.

“I think I have got qualifications for [mayor] and I plan to bring logic and reason, facts and evidence to decision-making.

“As part of the discipline I am involved in I gather a lot of information, I process a lot of information, some of it will be technical, so some of the stuff the council will come up with in terms of resource consenting I can understand it, it is my area.”

He still has to get his finger on the pulse in some areas. “I still have to read the RMA, all 900 pages, I do a lot of reading, a lot of analysis, it is part of my job.

“I think most people don’t appreciate what scientists do, we are not highly paid, but we are highly dedicated. I am used to working 12 hours a day.

“Bankers can generate wealth and print money, but Apple wouldn’t be a \$1 trillion company if it wasn’t for basic science that was and is done at universities and government research institutions.”

He admits that the voting public not knowing him could be a disadvantage.

“But they will get to know me.”

He is also culturally aware. “I am

a multi-cultural person, I have lived in four countries and speak English, Italian and Spanish.”

Dr Luca is aware of the “hot potato” issues – the plant to extend the Otakiri Springs water bottling plant, the Matata’s Awatarariki fan retreat plan. He has read the GNS report.

“And I will read whatever else has been produced ... I go for the evidence I go for the facts.”

There are other issues, including wealth disparity. “I see things in Whakatane, some striking changes. I see people walking around with shopping carts that I didn’t see before.

“I have seen homelessness in the United States and I did not want New Zealand to look like that.

“I am all for development, but it has to be sustainable because I believe without land, water and clean air all the dollar bills you can print are going to be useless, you can’t eat dollar bills.”

As for rates, he will put them under the “microscope”, he promised. “I think council has relatively good transparency and I would want to improve it.”

Dr Luca is ready to play a role in making Whakatane a better place for all.

“I think it is time to make a change and to contribute in another way. I did science to contribute to humanity.

“The things I have worked on have got relevance to the times that we find ourselves in. It worries me sometimes that all the politicians we have are invariably lawyers and I say where are all the technical and scientific people who should be involved in politics?”

Want to have your say at the Council table?

VOTE 2019
LOCAL ELECTIONS

Nominations for Bay of Plenty Regional Council’s 2019 elections open on Friday 19 July.
Find out if it’s the job for you at www.boprc.govt.nz/elections

