

Words fly as mayoral race heats up

The race to become Whangarei's mayor is heating up.

Postal voting starts in just three weeks from September 18 with the final deadline for completed voting papers to be returned being noon Saturday, October 9.

Nominees for mayor include incumbent Stan Semenoff, Terry Burkhart, Morris Cutforth, current councillor Vince Cocurullo, Don Hedges, Paul Jeeves, Mita Kayal Ruri, Isopo Samu, Warren Slater and Simon Vallings.

Of the candidates at least two Mr Cocurullo and Mr Slater have been asked to step aside to improve the chances of Mr Cutforth winning the

election. Mr Cocurullo, currently an Okara ward councillor, says he was approached by Northland regional councillor John Bain in June.

"He promised me any position that I wanted, if I did. He also told me that he and Peter Jensen (NRC) were doing this for Morris," says Mr Cocurullo.

"John also told me that they had done a survey and the people of Whangarei didn't want a young mayor. I told him I disagree, my survey told me otherwise."

Another candidate Mr Slater states on his website that he was asked to stand down because "big business people in town had put a can-

didate forward who in their opinion was high profile".

His website further states "big business operators want a mayoral puppet who will pull the strings in their favour".

Mr Cutforth confirms Mr Bain did approach Mr Slater and Mr Cocurullo to step aside.

"But it wasn't at my request," he says. "I'm happy to put myself up against anyone who challenges for mayor. There is enough support for me to challenge even with Warren and Vince in the mix.

"John went ahead enthusiastically because he felt I would have a better chance," says Mr Cutforth.

In a June 22 email to "all my friends and associates", Mr Cutforth acknowledges he was approached by business interests to run for mayor.

"This time last week I had no intention or thoughts of ever considering such a huge move. But last week I was contacted by a businessman in town who summoned me to a meeting.

"At the meeting he expressed that I was the most likely of anyone to be successful against the incumbent mayor.

"He and his colleagues are desperate to see a change of mayor. I was seen as a very suitable alternative."