I’ve taken this opportunity to welcome you and this conference to Dunedin – not because I support all of the various plans and projects that will be promoted here, but so you can hear why some of those plans are not welcome here.

So to be clear, if you’re promoting fossil fuel exploration, extraction and exploitation – and especially its expansion – then understand you are at odds with this community and my Council that represents it.

Of course, it hasn’t always been thus. Dunedin is a city built on mining – gold mining. And gold mining remains important to Dunedin today.

OceanaGold’s Macraes mine, most of it is actually in the Waitaki District, is New Zealand’s largest gold mine, producing around 200,000 ounces last year.

OceanaGold has its base in Dunedin, and contributes over $80 million to regional GDP, employing over 500 staff.

And I acknowledge that over the years we were a city reliant on a good deal of fossil fuel energy. Unfortunately we still are.

But while gold mining has been important to Otago for over 150 years, the community’s attitude to fossil fuels has changed completely over that time.

That’s because major negative impacts of climate change, thanks to humanity’s increased use of fossil fuels, are happening, in full view, around the world – across New Zealand, and particularly acutely here in Dunedin.

A higher frequency and intensity of rain events poses the most immediate risk and potential impact here – we’ve had several major flooding events in Dunedin in recent years with massive financial, physical and emotional impacts.

In the medium to longer term, sea level rise (and thus rising groundwater) will further increase the risk and potential impact to low-lying areas like South Dunedin – which has some 2,700 homes less than 50cm above the spring high tide mark – more than in any other city of New Zealand.

And those impacts are not just physical, infrastructural and financial – the people outside are just the visible tip of the iceberg of concern, distress and anxiety about the future – that is part of climate change’s toll on people’s physical and mental health.

The situation is urgent – indeed critical – for human society, for human health, and therefore for the economy.
That’s one of the main reasons why Dunedin has become a city with a strong track record of recognising and responding to the causes and effects of climate change.

So the people outside those doors are expressing the overwhelming view of this community and my Council.

In Dunedin, we are now having to make incredibly hard decisions about how to protect our communities from flooding, coastal erosion and sea level rise, because of decades of inaction by governments – local, central and international - and the fossil fuel industry.

This inaction has not been about scientific and evidential uncertainty, rather it is a result of the undermining of healthy public policy by the powerful influence of vested interests - the fossil fuel industry.

But that harmful influence can no longer be tolerated. That is why the Dunedin City Council – and the University of Otago for that matter – has divested our shares from fossil fuel exploration, extraction and exploitation.

As city leaders, we have a legislative, as well as a moral mandate, to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of our citizens. I am responsible to my community – not to business however many people they employ.

And I suggest the beneficiaries of business and industry – you and your shareholders - are responsible to the communities your industries work in and affect.

We don’t have any right to trade in our children’s and grandchildren’s futures just to make a quick dollar now.

That’s why I was the first signatory to the Local Government Leaders’ Climate Change declaration, calling for a precautionary approach with a rapid transition to low carbon, and supporting investments in renewable energy.

Dunedin has set its own target to become net carbon zero by 2050, and in recent years I and my Council have consistently opposed deep sea oil and gas exploration and extraction in New Zealand waters.

To protect the wellbeing of present and future generations from climate catastrophe, we know that further exploration and exploitation of fossil fuels is a dangerous and immoral folly, and incompatible with human survival and wellbeing.

I am told that as well as discussing traditional mining areas such as coal, this Forum will also be genuinely discussing climate change and sustainability, so that people can have informed debate.

I really do hope that is the case, and I look forward to contributing to that.

However, I think you will now be under no illusions about which side of the debate I and this city have landed on.

Dave Cull
Mayor of Dunedin