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Corporate Plan Output: Parks Plans & Policy Statements and New Assets - Reserve Purchases	

The purpose of this report is to progress and clarify the Council's planning work toward creation of a regional park for the Port Hills. In addition a number of recent opportunities to purchase more Port Hills land have necessitated preparation of a Strategic Acquisitions Strategy to put potential purchases in context. The strategy, which was presented to a seminar meeting of the Parks and Recreation Committee on 23 March 1999, is attached.

### REGIONAL PARKS

Regional park provision has been an important part of open space planning in New Zealand for 30 years.

Generally regional parks are created to provide for outdoor recreation experiences sought in high quality large countryside or conservation areas over 100 ha in size, accessible within 20 to 60 minutes drive of residential areas.

Integrated regional planning and favourable legislation has enabled both Auckland and Wellington to set up extensive regional parks systems. Christchurch however, hampered by its pre-amalgamation territorial divisions and a Regional Council without a legislative mandate to own land for parks purposes, has until relatively recently not pursued a parks system of this type. The following table illustrates the levels of Regional park provision in other areas of the country in comparison with Christchurch.

	<b>Current Population (Approx.)</b>	<b>Regional Park Type Land Ha</b>	<b>Ha/1000 Population</b>
<b>Auckland Region</b>	1,000,000	37,000	34.6
<b>Wellington Region</b>	419,000	49,000	118
<b>Christchurch Region (incl. Selwyn, Banks, Waimakariri areas)</b>	385,000	2,304	6

The Auckland Regional Council in its 1988 Land and Recreation access strategy is working toward a 50 year parks planning horizon when the Auckland region population is expected to double to two million people. Over the same period the Christchurch population alone may increase to somewhere between 370,000 (low estimate) to 620,000 (high estimate).

The Port Hills Regional Park Strategy aims to provide for existing and future generations of Christchurch area citizens, with an area of outstanding natural scenic, historical and cultural worth protected in perpetuity.

## **PORT HILLS IMPORTANCE**

The Port Hills are the most obvious natural feature in the Christchurch area. This 13,700 ha area between Godley Head and Gebbies Pass forms a geologically and biologically integrated entity, making up the Port Hills Ecological District. The hills include a diverse range of attributes of scenic, scientific, recreation, historic and tourist appeal. They represent one of the last significant vestiges of Christchurch's natural heritage encompassing ancient forests, native birds, expansive tussock grasslands, volcanic outcrops and a coastal frontage. All are potentially accessible in some form to the majority of the city population. Currently about 13% (1960 ha) of the total hills have reserve or similar status with security of public access.

The Port Hills importance to the people of Christchurch is clearly illustrated by recent survey work on the Summit Road corridor. It includes information on who uses the Port Hills, why, and where users come from. The survey shows around 96% of vehicle borne visits are for scenic/recreation reasons, and 89% of the local district visitors are from Christchurch City. Up to 30% of all users are tourists out of a total of 300,000+ annual person's visits (not including Gondola patronage or off road park users).

The City's strong interest in the future of the Port Hills is demonstrated by its role since 1945 as a land manager of a string of reserves located between Godley Head and Gebbies Pass. This now includes about 300 ha of Port Hills land outside the territorial boundary, which the City administers primarily for the benefit of its citizens, as well as tourists and people of the region. Proposed City Plan Vol. 2 policies also strongly support and promote sustainable recreation activities and maintenance and enhancement of the Port Hills' distinctive landscape and natural character.

However, changing land use has put many Port Hills values at risk.

The attached Strategy proposes that the Port Hills scenic, recreation and ecological values are of such great long term importance to Christchurch and surrounding district that a much larger area than present should be protected and developed as park for existing and future generations.

## **PORT HILLS REGIONAL PARK**

The idea of a regional park for the Port Hills has been around for many years. More recently several initiatives have been undertaken to promote the idea.

The release of District Plans by the three territorial authorities, within whose area the hills lie has helped bring the issue of the protection and future of this important scenic environmental and recreation resource to public prominence.

Public interest in the hills, greater understanding of Port Hills qualities, increased demand for adventure recreation opportunities and opportunity to purchase land at reasonable prices have created a situation where creation of a regional park is a highly desirable and timely option.

Implementation of the proposed strategy will achieve a visually and ecologically integrated parks system that provides for the recreation needs of the Christchurch population (primary users) and visitors. The Park will be based on three dominant features and potentials of the Port Hills; its Coastal Peninsula, tussock grasslands and its native forests.

Acquisition by way of property purchase on a willing seller, willing buyer basis is proposed as the primary means of park creation. Other means such as QEII covenants and gifting may be appropriate in some circumstances. Christchurch citizens will be the primary beneficiary of a Port Hills Park and to this end it is reasonable that the City take the initiative in its creation. However, the Port Hills are divided more or less equally between Banks Peninsula and Selwyn District Councils and the City. Continued local Government co-operation will be needed to facilitate successful creation of a visually and ecologically sustainable Port Hills Regional Park for the benefit of all.

#### **AREA AND COST**

The strategy proposes that over a ten year period up to 3100 ha more Port Hills land be brought into public ownership to form a Port Hills Regional Park.

The total park area is proposed to be in the vicinity of 5100 ha and potentially includes Council land owned, other public bodies, societies and trusts.

Possible purchase cost 3100 ha over 10 years.	\$7.34m.
Annual Christchurch City Council purchase vote required, approx	\$600,000
Development cost per year (average)	\$260,200
Annual maintenance cost of Christchurch City Council part of park, for up to 4326 ha.	\$846,000

#### **FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

It is reasonably likely that purchase of Port Hills land will receive financial support from other organisations apart from the Council.

The Government Funded Forest Heritage Fund now Nature Heritage Fund has been active in recent years in supporting the Summit Road Society purchase of three blocks of bush land along the upper Port Hills slopes above Governors Bay. Grants for bush blocks have been as high as 50% of purchase price. Selwyn District Council has also recently expressed a willingness to support land purchase in their area provided the City Council contribute significantly to the purchase price, and provide maintenance and infrastructural services.

Banks Peninsula District Council purchased a large block of land above Lyttelton a number of years ago.

Port Hills parks currently have the lowest operating costs, per unit of area, of any of the Council's regional parks.

A Port Hills park will have different management requirements to other regional parks in that a large area (over 1700 ha) will need to be grazed to maintain the tussock grassland and reduce fire risk. If managed appropriately returns from grazing have the potential to reduce annual maintenance costs. Rentals on private facilities such as the Gondola, and Sugarloaf and Mount Pleasant communications sites also currently help reduce operating costs. To put running costs in perspective, the 4326 ha potential Council owned part of a Port Hills Park would have a 40% higher overall operating cost than Hagley Park and up to 60% lower cost than the Botanic Gardens.

#### **COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND USE**

Survey data indicates that at least 97,000 Christchurch residents (over 18) visit the Port Hills each year. Godley Head Reserve alone currently attracts 80,000 visits per year. At least 84,000 tourists also visit the Port Hills. Summit Road Society, Port Hills 2000, and other groups strongly support the concept of greater Port Hills protection. Creation of a 5000 ha park will go a long way toward meeting that objective.

The importance that Christchurch residents place on the Port Hills as a city backdrop is clearly demonstrated by the recent petition on the future of Montgomery Spur. It would appear that the Port Hills are valued by many Christchurch residents and there is considerable demand for their protection and public access. A much larger area of the Port Hills acts as a city backdrop than is generally thought. For example the Port Hills backdrop viewed from Halswell/Westlake area is quite different to that viewed from the central city.

## CONCLUSION

Creation of a Port Hills Regional Park is a realistic option for Christchurch City. Community support for protection of Port Hills land is currently strong. The environmental gains of increased protection are likely to increase with time as native forests expand and mature, more effort is put into the Council's grazing management to foster silver tussock grasslands and as more public facilities are provided. (Walkways, mountain bike tracks, toilets, improved parking facilities, information/education facilities etc).

Environmental enhancement on the City's immediate back door step can only improve quality of life for city residents. Provision of a natural recreation area and visual backdrop, which contrast with, provides views of, and 'escape' from the city's urban form will become increasingly important to city people as urbanisation increases.

Purchase as the primary means of park acquisition on a 'willing seller, willing buyer' basis offers the public the greatest management control and flexibility as well as providing guaranteed access to the greatest number of features and activities.

In considering the proposed strategy, the Committee acknowledged the voluntary maintenance and development work done by members of the Summit Road Society over many years in partnership with the Council.

The Society is currently facing a decline in membership and proposes to implement a membership drive in an effort to address this. In light of the valuable support the Council receives from the Society, the Committee considered it would be appropriate for the Parks Unit to work with the Society in raising its profile and assisting with the membership drive.

The Acting Parks Manager gave an undertaking to report back to a future meeting on ways in which the Council could assist in this regard.

- Recommendation:**
1. That the concept of a Port Hills Regional Park be approved.
  2. That the Port Hills Regional Park Acquisition Strategy be approved as a basis for preparation of further land acquisition proposals which contribute toward the establishment of a Port Hills Regional Park.
  3. That liaison be maintained at staff and Council level as required between the City and Banks Peninsula and Selwyn District Councils on initiatives to further the Regional Park concept.