

2. PURCHASE OF RESERVE ON HEATHCOTE FLOODPLAIN AVOCA VALLEY STREAM



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The purpose of this report is to consider the purchase of a reserve on the Heathcote River floodplain, alongside lower Avoca Valley Stream.

LOCATION

The proposed reserve is located on the Heathcote River floodplain, surrounding the lower Avoca Valley Stream adjacent to Scruttons Road, as depicted as Lot 4 on the tabled plan S2954.

The area has been identified for protection and future restoration in the current Waterways and Wetlands Asset Management Plan (Project Area 1a: Port Hills).

BACKGROUND

The Heathcote River floodplain, located between Heathcote and Hillsborough, and alongside the Heathcote River, is an area of open, low-lying land which is a unique feature in this part of the city. The “Black Maps” of the 1850s show extensive low-lying areas of tidal and freshwater wetland habitats, comprising mainly saltmarsh, flax, toe-toe and raupo. Early accounts tell of abundant birdlife in the general area at the time of first European settlement, with currently 57 native bird species resident or visiting the Heathcote Valley and lower Heathcote River (Crossland 1998). The proximity to the estuary meant that this was an important area for Tangata Whenua, particularly for mahika kai, including a range of fish such as tuna (eels), inanga (adult whitebait) kanakana (lamprey) kokopu (*Galaxias* species) and pipiki (minnow).

From as early as the 1850s-60s, the area has been extensively modified and, apart from the salt marsh at Calders Green and the river margin plantings, the area is currently being used as either farmland, particularly for horse-grazing, or is unused land. The lower-lying farmland has been extensively drained and former natural streams such as the Avoca Valley Stream have been channelised and deepened.

SPECIAL PURPOSE ZONE (FERRYMEAD)/VARIATION 37

The land is currently zoned SP (Ferrymead) with an underlying Rural Zoning. A Council initiated Zone Change, Variation 37, seeks an RU2 zone over most of the area, adjacent to Scruttons Road.

This RU zoning, combined with riverside/estuary conservation zonings, is part of a strategy to provide a long-term buffer/green edge/wildlife refuge alongside the lower Heathcote River, which will limit significant development, and consequent filling, over existing low-lying, and hazard prone land

The 'new' land will add to the blocks already owned by the Council to better provide for 'core conservation habit' whilst also possibly allow for some limited recreational activity.

Public submissions to the Variation were heard by a Commissioner on 28 February 2000.

Purchase of this land is consistent with the zoning strategy and meets the current owners' expectations for the land. The agreement to buy, subject to Council approval, has averted a challenge to the proposed zoning for the land from the property owner. The land is also strategically placed to limit the options for development of adjacent land to the north, beyond the level the Council currently proposes as appropriate. Should the proposed zoning of the adjacent block not be accepted at the hearing for the Variation, control of the purchase land will at least offer a 'buffer' from any development to 'core habit' zones within the new conservation area.

DRAINAGE AND SEA-LEVEL RISE CONSIDERATIONS

The land sought is low-lying and would be subject to regular tidal inundation from the Heathcote River without the existing stopbanking and tidal controls in place.

The area is also prone to flooding from the Avoca Valley Stream and Butts Valley drain during severe storm events, coincident with high tides. Being low however, provides a very large area for floodwater storage, which protects low-lying areas upstream during such events.

Filling of this land, which would be required with any urban development, would see this storage and tidal buffer area lost and would compound drainage problems upstream.

Further, with the sea-level rise predicted over the next century, riverside/estuarine areas like this will be invaluable in that they will offer the City 'floodable' areas (notwithstanding the ecological benefits) to assist any future drainage system to hold back, or at least delay, the full impact of sea-level rise in this area.

CURRENT WILDLIFE VALUES

The current vegetation is either salt marsh at the estuary, salt pans found in low-lying areas, grazed pasture, or waste areas. Although considered less species rich than some other parts of the estuary, the area makes three important contributions to the overall ecological richness of the Avon-Heathcote system:

- This overall area contains a little less than half the surviving salt-marsh habitats found within the estuary and environs.
- The area comprises a core breeding ground for wetland birds.
- Several important high tide and night roost sites exist in the general area.

AVOCA VALLEY STREAM PLAN 1998

Since 1996, a local community group has been actively working on a plan for Avoca Valley Stream (whose source is on the Port Hills) which includes the land on the Heathcote floodplain, off Scruttons Road. Along with outside help, the group researched the general history and use of this area, and developed a vision for its future. A concept plan was drawn for an area of the Heathcote floodplain with a vision of encouraging a return of wildlife to something of its former richness.

The concept was begun at a public workshop held in Heathcote in 1997, further developed over the years, and has been referred to by the local Heathcote Community Association at further public meetings since that date.

The current owners of the land in question, have also actively developed the vision of restored habitat, a naturalised stream and increased wildlife. Restoration of the area's natural values is a clear vision of the current owners, the Stream Care Group and many of the local community.

FUTURE OPTIONS

Options for the future development of the proposed reserve will include the development of a "core habitat island" to recreate some of the lost habitats of the estuary complex (Meurk 1996). This will include the restoration of salt-marsh meadow and salt-marsh wetlands, "estuarine forest" on higher ground, provision of a large area for bird and fish habitat, creation of interpretation facilities and possible walkway that did not disturb wildlife, along with the development of a viewing hide in the general area (Restoring Avoca Valley Stream, 1998).

All of the investigations into naturalisation of the floodplain land conclude that much of the area should be allowed or assisted to revert to its original estuarine, marshland state. Such a vision would recognise local community groups' aspirations and those of tangata whenua, along with support from the current property owner.

This would also provide for future sea level rise drainage options and delay the likely inevitable “hard edge” between land and the sea, which will result from significant sea level rise, if we elect to protect existing development zones.

Adding to the existing land stock currently owned by the Council over this and the greater Ferrymead/Heathcote Valley area, also offers potential for some compatible recreational activity.

The Council has already been approached informally about the possibility of a golf course in this area. With further acquisition of adjacent land by Council or by private organisations, it may be possible to consider options for both conservation and recreational use of the greater area.

PROPERTY DETAILS

The property is situated on the eastern side of Scruttons Road at the northern end of the roadway which runs parallel to the Tunnel Road. This portion of Scruttons Road is gravel with that portion prior to the rail crossing being formed in kerb and channel at the present time. The block adjoins the Ferrymead Historic Park to its eastern boundary, adjoins the rail line and an electrical substation. The far reaches of the Heathcote River extend past the subject property. The Lyttelton Port Company own the 25 hectare block to the north of the subject property which it is seeking to have zoned Living 3 in order to facilitate its subdivision for residential development.

Commercial facilities are available at the intersection of Port Hills Road and Martindales Road. Of importance is the property’s location close to the sought after horticultural areas of Horotane Valley and Avoca Valley. Both of these valleys have come under considerable pressure from residential uses as small holdings for executive homes. They are situated within close proximity to the centre of Christchurch contained on elite soils and are subject to a micro climate.

A detriment to the location is the Tunnel Road, the existence of the power substation, the existence of waterways which extend through this site and the overhead powerlines transgressing the block to the rear. The location close to the city centre is obviously a major advantage.

ZONING

Under the Transitional District Plan of the former Heathcote District Council the subject site is zoned Rural. However, under the recently released City Plan the land is zoned Special Purpose Zone (Ferrymead). The Council has recently advertised Variation Number 37 to the City Plan and this is depicted on the tabled plan. It will be noted that part of the property is proposed to be zoned Living 1B with the balance being Rural 2.

A number of objections have been lodged against the Variation, including the Lyttelton Port Company Limited, which owns the land to the north and is seeking to have it zoned Living 3. Under the Living 1B zone residential development could take place within minimum section size being 2,000m², while under the Rural 2 zoning, the land could be subdivided into four hectare blocks.

Of the total area of 10.45 hectares proposed to be acquired by the Council, approximately 8,432m² is proposed to be zoned Living 1B.

PROPERTY SETTLEMENT

The property was valued for the Council by Ford Baker, Registered Public Valuers and for the owners by Fosters, Registered Public Valuers. The details of the proposed settlement and the respective valuations are included in the Public Excluded section of this report. An agreement has been entered into requiring the Council to confirm its purchase by 31 March 2000.

SOURCE OF FUNDS

The purchase will be funded from the Water Services Unit, Waterways and Wetlands Enhancement Fund. The allocation for the 1999/2000 financial year is \$1.105 million of which approximately \$800,000 has been committed this financial year. The agreement provides for a deposit to be paid when a separate title issues for the land and as a consequence, it is unlikely that this matter will be completed before the end of the financial year and as such it will probably not come to charge until the 2000/2001 financial year.

The above report was before the Hagley/Ferrymead Community Board at its meeting on 1 March 2000. The Board supported the proposal to purchase this land for reserve purposes.

Recommendation: That the above property be part of the land contained in Certificate of Title 35C/785 and containing approximately 10.45 hectares be acquired by the Council as a reserve.