

2. 'GREEN EDGE' DEVELOPMENT PLAN

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The purpose of this report is to inform the Council of progress in the development of a comprehensive plan for the Avon-Heathcote Estuary's western land margins including land now occupied by Linwood Paddocks, the oxidation ponds and Bexley Reserve. This report will also be presented to the Environment Committee, City Services Committee, Hagley/Ferrymead and Burwood/Pegasus Community Boards.

INTRODUCTION

The Avon-Heathcote Estuary (Te Ihutai) including its surrounding land margins, is one of Christchurch's most precious environmental assets and an important part of Christchurch's identity along with other treasured icons like the Port Hills, the Avon River and the vast Canterbury Plains. Situated only a few kilometres from our city centre, the Estuary is unparalleled among New Zealand estuaries in supporting such a large and varied wildlife population. Its close proximity to the Christchurch City Centre also provides excellent opportunities for the community and visitors to the City to enjoy the many recreational, heritage and educational values that the estuary has to offer.

Despite these values however, the estuary and its adjacent land margins have for many years suffered degradation with the natural coastal marshlands, forests, dunelands and wetlands being lost to development including the provision of roads, housing, recreational facilities and the construction of the oxidation ponds. Introduced trees, garden plants and exotic grasses have replaced native vegetation and the soft estuary shoreline has been replaced with hard edges, unnatural and often unsightly structures.

However, the recent City Council decision to continue to discharge a substantially improved quality of wastewater into the Avon-Heathcote Estuary now provides us with a unique opportunity to create an exciting and comprehensive plan for much of this adjoining land. A key component of the Council's 15-year wastewater disposal programme includes the creation of a 'Green Edge' along the western margins of the Avon-Heathcote Estuary including the current sites of Linwood Paddocks, Bexley Reserve and the oxidation ponds. This has the potential to not only protect and enhance existing remnant habitats, but to also re-create new 'natural' environments and open space areas which will enrich the ecological, recreational, heritage, educational, landscape and open space values already present in the area.

BACKGROUND

Policy 2.4.7 of the City Plan relates to a concept known as the 'green corridor'. The area broadly defined, extends from the Heathcote Valley along the coast as far as Brooklands Lagoon. The policy is aimed at:

- Strengthening the distinction between the hill suburbs and the seaside suburbs of the City;
- Protecting the productive rural land and undeveloped land around the margin of the estuary;
- Providing physical and visual definition between urban and rural development;
- Creating an opportunity for an integrated network of open space and public walkways which could be used extensively for recreation' and
- Supporting wildlife and habitats.

The Green corridor also links existing and newly developed ecological areas and parks, the anticipated outcome being a continuous ecological and recreational corridor on the eastern edge of Christchurch City. The City Plan identifies funding, land acquisition, production and implementation of landscape plans, planting and habitat improvement among the key non-regulatory methods of implementing the 'green corridor' concept.

A key component of this wider corridor is the "green edge" which relates to a substantial portion of largely undeveloped land around the western margins of the Avon-Heathcote Estuary and Avon River, currently in Council ownership. Key sites include Charlesworth Wetland, the Linwood Paddocks, Oxidation Ponds, Bexley Reserve and Bexley Wetland¹.

¹ It is important to note that while the Green Edge development project includes Charlesworth and Bexley Wetlands, concept and development plans for these areas are already well advanced so are not included within this project. The comprehensive plan will however be co-ordinated with these projects to ensure integration and compatibility between sub-projects and any adjacent development/restoration projects (Kibblewhite Reserve, Heathcote Valley for example).

WHY HAVE A 'GREEN EDGE'?

The Christchurch City Council has both moral and statutory obligations to protect and enhance the natural environment. The statutory mandate for pursuing environmental enhancement projects like the 'green edge' is provided for in a number of key documents as outlined below.

Agenda 21

At a global environmental summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, New Zealand was a signatory to a document that has become known as 'Agenda 21'. This document focuses on a number of issues, one of which is the need to conserve global biodiversity. New Zealand has a moral obligation to maintain and enhance the biota unique to this country as our contribution to global conservation. New Zealand has ratified the biodiversity convention resulting from this summit.

The Resource Management Act 1991

This is New Zealand's primary resource management document. The Act has as its purpose "to promote the sustainable management of natural and physical resources". Sections 6 and 7 of the Act provide the legal impetus to protect and enhance areas of significant indigenous vegetation and habitats, the natural character of the coastal environment, natural features and landscapes, the intrinsic value of ecosystems and public access to and along the coastal marine area.

Regional Plans and Policy Statements

The Avon-Heathcote Estuary is identified in the Proposed Regional Coastal Environment Plan (PRCEP) as an area of significant natural value (ASNV). There are a number of policies contained in the PRCEP and Regional Policy Statement (RPS) which recognise the importance of the estuary and adjacent land, and seek to protect the area from inappropriate use, subdivision and development. These relate particularly to landscape, ecology, heritage, the coastal environment and natural hazards. One such policy (Policy 2, Chapter 8: Landscape, Ecology and Heritage), states that creation of artificial wetland areas in suitable places, either as a strategic improvement in the provision of natural habitats, or as a means of dealing with discharges of contaminants, should be encouraged.

Christchurch City Council Annual Plan 2000/01

The Christchurch City Council's Annual Plan identifies a number of strategic goals and objectives which are deemed as vital to the community and Council. A number of these clearly support the Green Edge Concept/Project in particular the strategic goal of environmental sustainability which seeks to:

"Conserve and where practicable restore the natural environment and develop the built environment to enhance the distinct character and maximise the quality of life for current and future generations".

The Council aims to achieve this goal through the:

"Protection of significant natural features of the physical environment (such as the Port Hills and Estuary), open spaces and landscape elements, native habitat and ecosystems, significant buildings and sites and other taonga".

Christchurch City Council Proposed City Plan

The City Plan contains numerous objectives and policies that support the Green Edge project. This includes policies which seek to protect, restore and enhance areas of existing natural value and, others which promote the creation of new environmental assets such as wetland creation, green linkages, open space and recreational facilities. Some of these are listed below.

<i>Policy 2.4.7: Green Corridor</i>	<i>To establish a "green wedge" and green edge" on either side of the City</i>
<i>Policy 14.1.11: Green Linkages</i>	<i>To maintain the diversity of natural areas and enhance the City's system of recreation areas by providing "green" linkages between them.</i>

<i>Policy 2.2.6: Wetlands</i>	<i>To conserve and enhance the remaining wetland areas within the City and to create new wetlands in suitable areas.</i>
<i>Policy 2.2.8: Waterway margins</i>	<i>To enhance the margins of waterways in terms of their natural, amenity and access values.</i>
<i>Policy 2.4.3: Enhancement</i>	<i>To promote environmental enhancement and rehabilitation of natural areas</i>
<i>Policy 2.4.4: Ecosystems & Habitats</i>	<i>To maintain and enhance the integrity and diversity of natural ecosystems and habitats within the City.</i>
<i>Policy 2.4.5: Extended Protection</i>	<i>To further extend and protect natural ecosystems and habitats</i>

THE 'GREEN EDGE' COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

In August 2000, a multi-disciplinary project team was established to develop the comprehensive plan for this area. A series of meetings was held and a vision, goal and objectives were generated for the project.

The Project area has been divided into a number of sub-areas with teams of specialist staff who will investigate and produce draft concepts for their relative areas. The sub-projects will be integrated, consistent and complement one another and will eventually be extrapolated onto one comprehensive plan for the entire western Green Edge area.

Key Elements of Project

Bexley Reserve

- Development of Bexley Reserve into an attractive recreation reserve that would play an important role in the transition between the City's suburban edge and the more natural areas associated with the Te Huingi Manu Wildlife Reserve and Estuary.

Shoreline

- Development and implementation of a concept of landscape treatment for the Estuary's western shoreline involving, where possible, the removal of hardfill, revegetation/planting programme involving the re-introduction of saltmarsh species where appropriate. The re-profiling and/or replenishment of the western foreshore with earthworks and the deposition of materials which will create a more naturalised and attractive shoreline.

Oxidation Ponds

- Re-configuration and restoration of the oxidation ponds and surrounding area to a sand dune and wetland mosaic type habitat including the naturalisation of pond margins and estuary shoreline.
- Retention of islands as a vital breeding habitat.

Linwood Paddocks

- Habitat creation and enhancement of Linwood Paddocks including the re-establishment of saline and brackish ecosystems of saltmarsh and ribbonwood, establishment of coastal forest where possible and the enhancement of roosting and breeding sites in key ecological areas (e.g. Sandy Point). Retention/provision of a significant area of open paddock grassland as habitat for Pukeko.
- Provision for the development of experimental natural treatment of wastewater in engineered wetlands.

Recreational, Amenity, Education and Heritage Values

- Provision of recreational facilities including picnic and carparking areas
- Creation of a continuous movement network for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Provision of habitat and recreational linkages between adjacent conservation and/or open spaces areas (eg Bexley Wetland, Charlesworth Wetland).
- A strong educational focus encouraging greater knowledge and understanding of the special ecological and cultural values of the area. This may include an education centre, a series of interpretation signs and bird hides.
- Interpretation signs throughout area drawing public attention to key wildlife and heritage values.

Timing and budget

Investigation for and preparation of the plan is to be completed by June 2001. This includes developing the detailed concept plans for sub-projects, integration of these onto one comprehensive plan and undertaking the relevant consultation as outlined below. The long-term work plan is planned to be implemented over the next 15 years with work scheduled to begin in 2005 (initial phase expected to be completed by 2007). This programme has been included in the indicative capital works programme at a cost of \$14 million (including major re-configuration works to oxidation ponds), with ongoing maintenance costs estimated to be \$300,000.

Consultation

Engaging the many interest groups, organisations and individuals with a key interest and/or expertise relating to the estuary and its adjacent environs is fundamental to the success of this project as it is imperative that the community's views, aspirations and ideas are reflected in this plan. As such, a wide range of community consultation is currently underway and will continue throughout the project. This includes public meetings, an on-site open day, and letters/brochures throughout informing the community of the project's progress and critical milestones. The preliminary consultation process is expected to continue through to late April/Early May.

Tangata Whenua

The Council is developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu focusing on the development of the estuary's western Green Edge. Discussions to date indicate that this could provide a valuable area for mahinga kai and other traditional activities. Key points of the memorandum are that:

- It is not a legally binding relationship but it is intended to enable the parties to work together in good faith for their mutual benefit;
- It is intended to ensure that Council takes into account spiritual and cultural values of tangata whenua, particularly relating to the use and management of water resources;
- It sets up a process of consultation over decisions that will be made and provides a guide to relationships between the Council and Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu regarding consents for the wastewater treatment plant and management of the Estuary's western 'green-edge'.

It is anticipated that the Memorandum of Understanding will be finalised by early 2001.

CONCLUSION

As shown above, the importance of protecting areas of significant conservation value is recognised in many environmental statutes and policy documents. The 'Green-Edge' project team is developing concepts for translating this recognition into a comprehensive, integrated and exciting concept plan to be implemented over the next 15 years. The projects fulfils many of our obligations under international conventions and national legislation as well as honouring the Council's commitment to the citizens of Christchurch to conserve and restore the natural environment. This project has the potential to enhance the already significant natural, recreational, heritage and educational values of the area to the extent where the 'green-edge' can be showcased as an example of our environmental sustainability ethic and, our commitment to ensure that the future generations may also enjoy the environmental assets that we enjoy today.

Recommendation: That exotic plants and trees (phoenix palms, excelsior pinus, casurina oaks, flowering gum trees as well as rata and pohutakawa indigenous trees) be included, where appropriate, in any Green Edge planting plan being released for public consultation.