

10. ACQUISITION OF LAND FOR RESERVE – DICKEYS ROAD, BELFAST

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Corporate Plan Output: New Assets (water way and wetland 9.3.45)	

The purpose of the report is to consider the purchase of a reserve in Dickeys Road, Belfast.

PROPERTY DETAILS

The area to be acquired contains an approximate area of 10.8ha and currently forms part of a large land holding of 73.907ha. The land concerned is depicted as Lot 1 on the attached plan 23192/2a. The subject parcel of land is located to the north-eastern side of Dickeys Road between the intersecting roadways of Coutts Island Rd to the north and the Main North Road to the South. This location is described as Coutts Island to the south of the Waimakariri River and to the north-west of Belfast. It is characterised by a number of low-lying areas, being former parts of the Waimakariri River, and is therefore quite low-lying in parts with a number of creeks/drains evident as well as swamp areas.

Surrounding development comprises a Department of Conservation Wildlife Reserve to the north west of the subject property, which in turn is adjoined by two lifestyle blocks which have frontage to Coutts Island Road. Land further to the north-east is primarily utilised for farming purposes, whilst land to the south and east is either owned or leased by the vendor for grazing purposes. Similar use is evident to the opposite side of the Dickeys Road, although further afield is the well-known Mundy Brothers' Vineyard, whilst further to the west is the substantial Clearwater Golf Resort which is currently under development.

The location is therefore on the fringe of Belfast in the lifestyle/farming area which is located in the Waimakariri floodplain. The land concern has no legal road frontage and, as such, right-of-way easements are being secured to provide both public and Council access to the property. Part of the property has been filled which will provide an appropriate parking and access point for the public when the reserve is fully developed.

INTRODUCTION

Acquisition of the South Branch Farm Wetland (referred to hereafter as Farm Wetland) will protect the part of Coutts Island Swamp located on private land. The adjoining 9.9ha Coutts Island Wildlife Sanctuary is a reserve administered by the Department of Conservation and part of the same swamp over an old channel of the Waimakariri River.

Within the Christchurch area once characterised by wetlands and waterways, less than 10% of the wetland area prior to settlement remains because of the cumulative effects of drainage and filling. This purchase, when considered together with the DoC land, would provide the third largest freshwater wetland reserve in Christchurch. Not only does the farm wetland have high intrinsic natural values in itself, but its protection through acquisition enhances the long-term viability of the adjoining DoC wetland reserve.

The area under consideration includes a range of complementary habitat of grazing marsh, open tall tussock swamp, swamp with willow canopy, open water and riparian margins which support a wide range of birdlife. Approximately 20% of the area has been filled with landfill by a previous owner. The filled area which overlooks the swamp has low existing natural values, but can be used to provide public areas from Dickeys Road to view the swamp.

VALUES

The farm wetland has high ecological values.

The following comments from a Department of Conservation report regarding the adjoining Coutts Island wetland are applicable:

“Regardless of the exotic component, the wetland vegetation remains intact and its assemblage of species is highly representative of an ecosystem once widespread in Canterbury, but today is very rare. The only other similar wetland in the area is Otukaikino at the beginning of the motorway and the proximity of these two remnant areas further heightens each areas importance due to their functioning as habitat corridors for native wildlife. As a result the area contains outstanding conservation values and any management initiatives must ensure that the integrity of the wetland is not compromised.”

Coutts Island wetland has been identified in the City Plan as Environmental Heritage Site 3.07. A proposed City Plan variation to extend the area to include the farm wetland within the Environmental Heritage Site is in progress.

The wide range of habitat supports a diversity of birdlife. Andrew Crossland, ornithologist, has observed regionally rare Bittern in addition to Pukeko, Grey Duck, Mallard, Grey Warbler, Fantail, Silvereye, White-faced Heron, Paradise Shelduck, Kingfisher and Spurwinged Plover on the farm wetland. He considers it likely that the site is also frequently used by New Zealand Shoveler, Grey Teal and Pied Stilt as well.

The site is strategically located under the Waimakariri's flyway and is an integral part of the wildlife corridor network including the Waimakariri, the Groynes and Otukaikino wetland.

The wetland is spring-fed with a reliable outflow summer and winter of approximately 50 l/s. The aquatic biodiversity is limited at present by decaying willow debris.

The present owner is sympathetic to providing access strips in the future along waterway corridors through his property, eventually linking the Waimakariri and Farm Wetland to the Waimari walkway from the Groynes.

The existing recreational and educational values of the farm wetland would be greatly enhanced by these linkages.

MANAGEMENT

For the foreseeable future, it is envisaged that on-going management of the farm wetland will be low-key and low-cost with the prime objective of maintaining existing conservation values. A reserve management plan will be prepared in consultation with the Department of Conservation and the present owner.

Management activities will include a grazing licence over part of the site to control grass growth, noxious weed control, the control of willow spread and minimal waterway maintenance.

The Department of Conservation supports acquisition of the farm wetland and acknowledges the initial benefit of having the two contiguous reserves from both a conservation protection and co-operative management point of view.

The appropriate clarification for the site is "Scenic Reserve" pursuant to Section 19 of the Reserves Act 1977.

Scenic Reserve status both protects natural values and allows public access. (Travis Wetland is a Scenic Reserve.)

The farm wetland has high restoration potential to enhance its ecological and recreational values. Restoration activity is envisaged in the long-term as land use changes and other linkages are established.

ZONING

Under the Christchurch City Plan, the property is zoned Rural 4.

AGREEMENT

The Council engaged the services of Ford Baker, registered public valuers, to assess the land's value, the details of which are included within the public excluded section of this report. Agreement has been reached with the owner to acquire the area subject to and conditional upon the Council undertaking the necessary survey, as well as fencing the area and creating the proposed easements to provide public and Council access, as well as permitting the owner/access to the drains for stockwater.

FUNDING

Purchase of the farm wetland has been specifically provided for in the draft 2001/002 Parks and Waterways budget.

On-going maintenance costs can be met from either the Otukaikino maintenance or Wetlands maintenance line items under the Waterways and Wetlands operations output.

SUMMARY

Southbranch Farm wetland is an important remnant of an eco-system now very rare in Canterbury. Acquisition to protect its existing ecological values, especially birdlife, is recommended.

The benefits include:

- Extension of the existing DoC-administered Wildlife Sanctuary next door, together creating the third largest freshwater reserve in the Christchurch District
- Shared management of the one wetland complex for multiple benefit
- Protection of a strategic link in the wildlife corridor between the Waimakariri River and the Estuary
- Easy public access off Dickeys Road for passive recreation and environmental education
- Long-term future opportunities for green corridor linkages between the Groynes and the Waimakariri

The above proposal was considered and supported by the Shirley/Papanui Community Board at its meeting of 31 January 2001.

Recommendation: That 10.8ha approximately, as depicted on the attached plan, be purchased as a Scenic Reserve pursuant to Section 19 of the Reserves Act 1977 subject to the terms and conditions contained in the public excluded section of this report.