

4 PROPOSED CHANGE OF COUNCIL'S WASTE REDUCTION TARGET: PROGRESS REPORT

Officer responsible City Water and Waste Manager	Author Zefanja Potgieter , DDI 371-1271
Corporate Plan Output: Solid Waste/Waste minimisation	

The purpose of this report is to advise the progress made by the Subcommittee hearing public submissions on the proposed change in the Council's waste reduction target.

BACKGROUND

On 22 March 2001 the Council resolved to publicly notify a proposed change to its waste reduction target of Zero Waste to landfill by 2020. The new targets proposed are:

- (a) Zero waste to landfill as soon as possible, taking into account social, legal and economic constraints.
- (b) A minimum reduction by 50% of waste to landfill from 2000 to 2020.
- (c) Zero organics to landfill by 2010.

A Subcommittee consisting of Councillors O'Rourke, Wells and Thompson was appointed to hear public submissions.

The four week period for public submissions was subsequently extended by another week to 11 May 2001, and the Subcommittee met on 16 May to hear those submitters who requested to present their submissions in person (11 of the total of 26 submissions received). Of the 11 to be heard one submitter could not attend on 16 May and no response was received from another submitter. The Subcommittee therefore resolved to allocate an additional day for hearing of submissions in order to give the two submitters who did not attend on 16 May another opportunity to present their points of view on the 21 May. The additional day for hearing submissions means postponing the final report on the proposed changes to the waste reduction targets to the June Council meeting.

This progress report concludes with comments on waste reduction targets from the Chairman of City Services Committee.

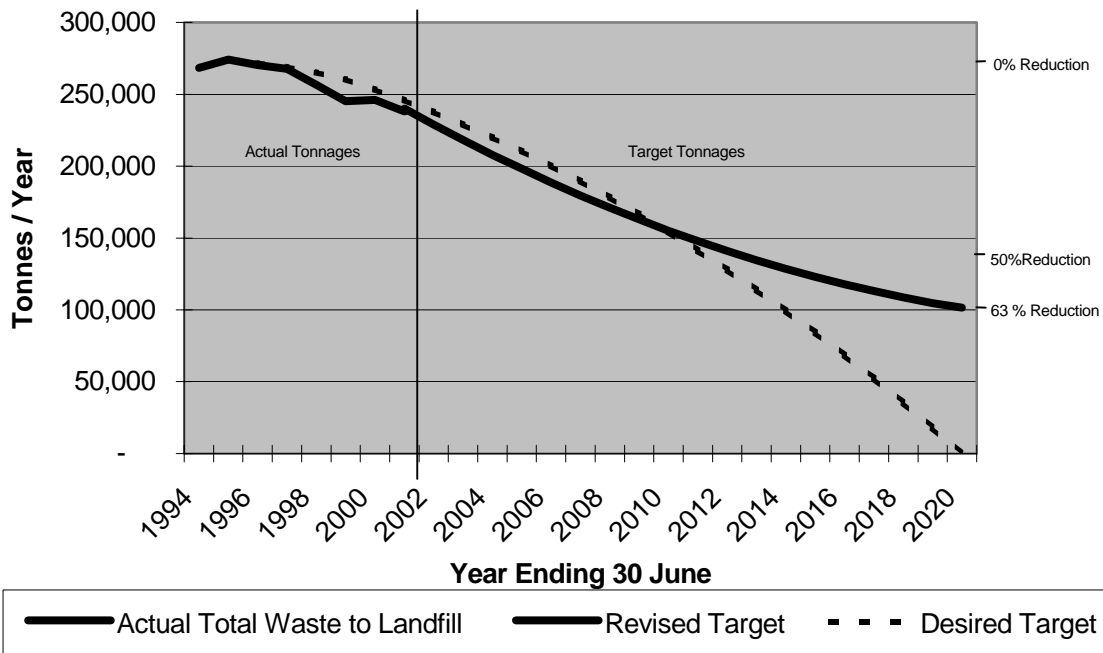
CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

The staff report has set out the progress made so far in this process. I wish to add the following comments as a means of putting the proposals into context.

"In 1994 Christchurch was one of the first councils to develop a formal waste plan, reviewed in 1998. I proposed and the Council accepted, the goal of 'Zero waste to landfill', and a target - the year 2020. In 1994 virtually all of the waste under the control of the Council was landfilled at Burwood, and we had little idea whether this rather idealistic target was feasible, or how it would be achieved in practice.

Since then, a plant currently composting 35,000 tonnes of green waste per year has been established at Bromley, and the Recovered Materials Foundation is recycling 14,000 tonnes per year of household waste collected at the kerbside. We have also learned a lot about the costs, and other constraints inherent in recycling or avoiding the 240,000 tonnes of waste per year still to be diverted from the landfill.

Total Waste To Landfill



The above graph shows the 'desire line' (the zero waste goal) beginning with 274,000 tonnes (including hardfill) of waste as at the year 1994 and ending with target zero at the year 2020. Above that the 'trend line' shows the point we have now reached (a reduction of about 13%) as a result of composting, recycling and diversion of hardfill, and a projection as far as the year 2020. This projection, based on current trends, taking into account current constraints, and in the light of the experience of the last five years, demonstrates that a further 50% reduction of waste to landfill (in addition to the 13% we have already achieved, i.e. a total of about two thirds is the best we can realistically expect.

Not only does this extremely demanding target require the expenditure of millions more dollars by the City Council (and there are limits to what we can afford) on expanded composting and recycling, but also a much greater commitment by the community as a whole. Recycling and composting could not achieve the two thirds reduction target without an additional commitment within both the domestic and business communities to embrace very stringent waste avoidance measures. These would almost certainly have to involve economic incentives and disincentives and other tough measures, such as bans of some materials from the waste transfer stations, generating resistance from parts of the community. These social and economic constraints in achieving our zero waste goal must not be underestimated.

Similarly, there are legal constraints. Some of these are: the lack of mandatory landfill standards in New Zealand, insufficient regulatory powers by local government, and the effect of the Commerce Act. For example insufficient regulatory power may mean that the City Council can only apply its waste minimisation levy to Council waste facilities, restricting the Council from applying the levy to private waste facilities too. But the most serious legal constraint is the lack of government imposed minimum landfill standards. Canterbury's new landfill is to be sited and built to the highest technological standards. It costs millions of dollars to secure a site with the right geological, hydro-geological and other physical attributes, together with the installation of an impermeable liner and capping, and leachate and gas collection systems, as well as a transport system imposing the lowest possible environmental and social impacts on local communities. If a landfill in a neighbouring region is permitted to be developed without these attributes (this is actually happening elsewhere), then because its cost structure would be much lower, its fees will also be much lower. The result would be for our waste to transfer from Canterbury to the lower cost option in the neighbouring region. Our councils could not prevent this because they do not have 'flow control', i.e. we cannot tell commercial waste disposers (who control more than 80% of the waste stream) where to take the waste they collect. They will therefore take the cheapest option. The result for Canterbury could be not only the failure of the new regional landfill project (forcing us to try to keep Burwood open), but also the collapse of our recycling system as well, since it is funded from a levy on landfill.

These and a raft of other constraints show that the target date of 2020 for zero waste to landfill was optimistic in the extreme. Idealism was fine in the context of our knowledge in 1994, but in the context of experience gained since then, persistence with a zero waste target by 2020 would now simply be dishonest. This does not mean, however, that I or the Council are resiling in any way from the zero waste goal. Indeed, we have determined to increase our efforts, as proposals published in the council's draft annual plan for increased expenditure on composting and recycling clearly show. But the zero waste goal must be pursued in the context of a waste plan which has credibility. This requires realistic targets rather than pie-in-the-sky idealism. The proposed variation of the waste goal is as follows:

'Zero waste to landfill as soon as possible, taking into account social, economic, and legal constraints'.

The amended specific targets proposed are:

'Zero organics to landfill by 2010'.

'A minimum of a 50% reduction of waste to landfill by 2020'.

The zero waste goal therefore remains intact, while the constraints in achieving zero waste are openly and honestly acknowledged. By doing so we can focus attention on the need to remove or reduce these constraints. Demanding yet realistic targets are retained. The 50% additional reduction target is stated as a minimum, thus requiring us to do better than this if possible. If the constraints can be somehow sufficiently overcome in the future, it would then be appropriate to further revise the targets to reflect this.

Information available from international environmental agencies suggests that a diversion rate in the 30% to 35% range is towards the very top of current international best practice. Copenhagen at 66%, has achieved higher percentages, but most cities and regions in the world are well below the 30% level. In areas that are in the forefront, the cost of disposal is typically many times the existing costs in Canterbury (around \$30 per tonne expected to go to up towards \$60 with the new landfill). In Copenhagen, a massive landfill tax was imposed, and residents are obliged by law to separate their waste. The public investment in facilities to achieve their world-leading diversion rate is huge, including incinerators, centralised public home heating networks, recycling plants, etc.

The Danish authorities themselves identify the two drivers to achieve diversion from landfill, as lack of landfill space (although 14,000 tonnes per year of toxic incinerator ash is still landfilled) and groundwater pollution from their high water tables and flat land. Disposal costs are over \$200 per tonne, net of energy sales income (from incinerators). In Holland, the same drivers exist. Disposal charges are subsidised from local taxes, but tend to be \$400 per tonne and higher. Again, the level of investment in infrastructure to support the high recycling rates is huge. Holland has not yet got to 50% diversion. Always, these initiatives are supported by large populations (relative to Canterbury), strong local and central government legislative powers to control all waste, tax incentives, government subsidies, and lack of suitable land for landfilling. None of this applies in New Zealand, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The Council could have chosen not to bother to revise the waste targets, but not to do so compromises the credibility and utility of our waste plan. Most particularly, the Council has to plan ahead for the necessary capacity to meet waste and recyclables collection requirements, capital and operational development of the Recovered Materials Foundation, and the size and nature of the new regional landfill. Long-range budgets and financial models, covering 20 years are required for these purposes. These must be based on realistic expectations (i.e. the 'trend line' shown in the graph, rather than the 'desire line'). To do otherwise would risk a disastrous mismatch between planning and budgeting on the one hand, and the actual requirements for capacity to deal with waste and recyclables on the other.

It has been suggested by some of the more cynical members of the community that these are not the reasons for the Council's proposals to vary its waste targets, and that the real reason is some far-fetched conspiracy between the participating Canterbury councils and their commercial joint venture partners in Transwaste Canterbury Ltd to make as much money as possible out of the project by maximising the volume of waste going to the landfill. The fallacy in this preposterous proposition is obvious: if the objective was to mislead the public, we would not have suggested any change to the waste minimisation targets at all, and would have instead quietly left them as they are, rather than to openly and honestly propose a 50% additional reduction in waste to landfill over the next 20 years. The fact that the councils and their joint venture partners have openly committed themselves to such a demanding target (as a minimum) is actually a quantum leap forward for waste minimisation unparalleled anywhere else in New Zealand. But this is no magnanimous gesture on the part of our joint venture partners. It is a binding contractual obligation written into the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between them and the councils that they will fully co-operate with the waste minimisation goals being pursued. They also recognise that as landfilling is managed towards zero, more of their business will have to be conducted in recycling activities. In addition, the MOU only lasts for 20 years, after which there is no agreement to continue landfilling at all – therefore there can be no secret agenda to perpetuate this.

In the end, the current issue comes down not to whether there is still a zero waste goal (that has never been in question) but only what the appropriate targets are. Controversial or not, openness and honesty in the simple matter of adopting realistic waste minimisation targets, is always the best policy.

Finally, Councillors need to be clear what a waste plan under the Local Government Act is. It is not just a plan for general positioning for motivational/PR purposes. It is necessary to have one formally adopted before a waste minimisation fee can be levied (which we have done – the only Council in New Zealand to do so). The problem is that it must therefore form the basis of our long range planning and financial modelling, for CCC collection operations and projects like cleaner production, for Recovered Materials Foundation planning and budgeting, and for planning and financial modelling for the new regional landfill. There is no problem arising from retaining a zero waste goal, but a zero waste target within 20 years means we must plan and budget for it (otherwise the plan is dishonest and would become irrelevant for all practical purposes). This would mean large additional budget provisions over up to 20 years ahead (many times more than the \$7.1 million currently budgeted for recycling). Some commentators argue for this and others claim it can be done more cheaply. We as Councillors must judge how much we can afford to devote to this at the expense of other programmes. In the case of the landfill, if we had to do a financial plan based on zero at 20 years, the charges must be much higher to allow for amortisation of full development costs over that period. Apart from public resistance, such charges may well make the project uneconomic and uncompetitive, resulting in the inevitability of either private landfills and transfer stations being set up, or waste transferring out of the region. This would leave the Council trying to extend Burwood instead for many more years, possibly decades. Do Councillors really want to risk an attempt to get such consents for Burwood? Alternatively, we could get out of landfilling altogether, but in so doing we would lose control of this, with serious downsides for our waste minimisation initiatives.

These ramifications are real, and I would ask Councillors to take them very seriously indeed. In so doing, I reiterate once more that despite the proposed target change, we would still have a zero waste goal to be implemented as soon as possible; and if the constraints are somehow removed fast enough, this goal could still be achieved within the 'desireline' of zero by 2020.

I realise that some members of the public will not understand these factors, but we must take account of them in making our decision. We need not make the final decision now and should defer it until June. Over the next month we need to study how we can meet as much of the submitters' requests as possible, without making an unbearable rod for our own back in terms of the ramifications indicated above. I am happy to undertake to investigate this.

SUMMARY

The Subcommittee appointed to consider public submissions on the proposed waste reduction targets will report to the June meeting of the Council.

Recommendation: That the report on the proposed changes to the solid waste reduction targets be considered at the June meeting of the Council.