

1. WHERE TO WITH THE CITY PLAN?

| | |
|--|--|
| Officer responsible Environmental Services Manager | Author Bob Nixon, DDI 371 1669 |
|--|--|

The purpose of this report is an attempt to “look ahead” with the City Plan process, and suggest a possible approach to progressing it (and looking beyond) over the next 5-6 years. It is perhaps an opportune time to take stock of the Proposed Plan, as it nears its final stages towards becoming operative, a process which began as long ago as 1990. In doing this, I acknowledge that the Council may well choose an alternative path.

The process of hearing references before the Environment Court and through consent orders is now well advanced, and it is not unreasonable to expect that the great majority of references will be resolved by the end of 2004. Even if there are a few outstanding references, the Plan could still be made operative. Delays by the Court issuing decisions will probably be the main factor affecting the timing of this.

With the passage of time, the proportion of staff time spent on references can be expected to gradually decline, and that on draft variations and options papers to increase (see attached diagram).

At present, the Council is continuing work on variations for:

- Priority matters needing early attention.
- Minor refinements/improvements to the Plan (the first batch of these are being considered at this Committee meeting).

It is also contemplating (as resources permit) options papers on greenfield subdivision controls and the provisions controlling development in the Living 3 and 4 zones. It is important to maintain some momentum on this task, as by 2004 much of the Plan content will date back as much as 15 years, and some (although not all) will be overdue for review. There is also the prospect of privately initiated plan changes being sought two years after the Plan becomes operative, and this makes it desirable to avoid being put in a reactive mode. A process for prioritising variations and plan changes is attached to this report.

This pressure to update the Plan supports the preparation of options papers and draft plan changes for notification when the Plan becomes operative and beyond. By having an ongoing process of gradual review and refinement, it will be possible to spread out medium and long-term workload and reduce peak workloads when the decision to undertake the next review is undertaken. There will never be an ideal level of resourcing, and the Council cannot be expected to fund this. I consider that work towards the next plan review (using changes to the current plan as a springboard) should begin about two years after the Plan is operative, followed by notification about three years after that. Any decision on this should be influenced by the following factors:

- Indications of any major changes to, or review of, the RMA;
- The development of a cross-boundary urban growth strategy;
- Community advocacy;
- Available resourcing.

In respect to this last point, it is worth repeating that if controversial plan changes are to be contemplated, they will absorb staff and financial resources. This is **not** a reason to avoid such changes, but to initiate them in full acknowledgement of the resources likely to be required.

URBAN GROWTH

This issue has probably dominated the City Plan process, and has proved costly for almost everyone involved. Although recent Environment Court decisions have been painted as a developer victory (over CRC in particular), the situation in reality is more subtle and complex than this.

Careful analysis of Environment Court decisions reveals that urban growth can be managed, but it has to be promoted on a carefully considered and researched basis. The City Plan's policy structure has emerged from the process reasonably intact, with the exception of the soils policy, which mirrors that in the RPS. Lessons to be learned from the process are:

- The need for policies to be supported by adequate research, rather than being articles of faith. Densification for example, is not in itself a panacea for urban growth problems. What would be the effects of doubling existing densities? Would it simply concentrate congestion and pollution in a smaller area? Densification may be one method for addressing urban growth issues, but would have to be complemented by other methods.

- Urban growth issues (at least through RMA regulation) has to be addressed in terms which include not only transport, but also other factors.
- The operation of the land market is not the only factor affecting housing costs, but it is an important one. Even under the draconian (by New Zealand standards) British planning system, housing affordability is an issue which must be addressed in the planning system.
- If urban growth of a particular form or in a particular location, is to be avoided, we must consider the likely sustainability implications of it going somewhere else based on “real world” scenarios. This is reflected in the Environment Court’s view that the city’s urban growth cannot effectively be regulated in isolation from urban development in adjoining districts.
- There is a common mantra both within and outside the Council that “the policies are fine”, it is just that the “rules don’t support them”. This view is not supported by the evidence – there is a problem with the nebulous nature of policies in the RPS, and indeed in plans generally – no one is blameless in this regard. In too many cases it is nebulous policies that are the weak link, and provide little or no assistance for plan administration.
- Although it is common to hear complaints that there is “too much land” on the market, it does provide a breathing space for perhaps gaining greater community acceptance of different housing styles and higher densities. This opportunity would not have been possible with tight rationing of land, and would have resulted in excessive housing costs.
- We (and Councils generally) are getting better at Section 32 analysis, but still have a way to go. Section 32 is **not** about identifying resources for protection, important though that is. It is about what is then **done** to protect these resources – is the regulation necessary (ie not self-evident), efficient and effective? Can it be administered/enforced and what are the costs of doing so?

Finally, there is an increasing tendency to adopt extreme positions on regulation itself. Frustration with challenges to “planning” under the Resource Management Act have led to a despairing view that everything needs to be done through non-regulatory means. Rather, it is the quality of regulation which is important and regulation is still **one** important tool in the toolbox for promoting sustainable management of resources.

It will be important to assess areas around the city which are likely to be subject to future development pressures, eg north-west Belfast, Hendersons Road area, Burwood, and the Russley Road/Hawthornden Road area. This will avoid the Council being placed in “reaction” mode when privately initiated plan changes are sought later. Work towards an Urban Growth Strategy (through the Strategic Planning Team) would assist with this task.

Attached is a schedule showing a list of current and proposed variations and their relative “urgency”. These can be commented on further at the meeting.

- Recommendation:**
1. That the information be received.
 2. That the Council record its appreciation of Bob Nixon’s committed service during his 11 years of employment with the Council.