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To Councillors and the Council team

Our Committee spent most of our March meeting discussing the proposed 9.88% rate increase on properties valued at \$300,000 etcetera. We agreed that such a proposed rate increase is excessive and therefore unacceptable. One member of the Committee argued that rate increases should not exceed the general level of inflation. I, as Chairman, pointed out that this was possibly not realistic since the Government's reckless immigration policy with no planning for houses for the immigrants has resulted in horrendous house-price increases and in an accompanying regrettable inflation in construction costs. Cr Helen Broughton, who was present at the meeting, wondered if "a 5% increase" would be acceptable. We then agreed that we would be grateful if the proposed increase could be reduced to that level.

In this context, I would point out that my own rates increased by just over \$5 a week last year. This was partly due to an upward valuation of the house and section owned by my wife and I. Our sole income is government superannuation. At the beginning of April 2005, this increased from \$191.61 per week to \$196.78 per week, so the rate increase used up exactly half of the increase meant to compensate for general price increases. (I say "half" because a rate increase of \$5 a week comes to \$2.50 a week when shared by my wife and myself).

A Halving of the Proposed Increase?

On page 71 of Volume 1 of the "Plan" it says:

"As a rough guide, every extra \$12.5 million of capital expenditure will add approximately 1% to rates."

Conversely, it follows that if some proposed large item of capital expenditure such as the "New Bus Exchange, \$59.5", is either removed from this "Plan" or replaced by a far less expensive alternative, a substantial reduction in the proposed rate increase would be possible. While it is called a "10-year Plan", there is a new or modified such Plan every three years, so present "removal" wouldn't mean it couldn't be added in three years.

Finding little information on this or other expensive projects in the Plan, I spent the morning of the 26 April trying to ring members of Council staff who, I was told, might be able to give me information. All I ever got was answer-phones with cell-phone numbers and, since the last time I rang someone on a cell-phone it added \$12.00 to my monthly phone bill, I wasn't prepared to try that again. In the afternoon I cycled to the Council Offices to try to find some staff member who could give me some information. An Asian woman at "Reception" said to someone on the phone, "I have a customer here." "A ratepayer," I corrected her.

Anyway, I eventually was allowed to talk to Peter Atkinson for about 45 minutes. He talked of bus patronage possibly increasing "by 10% per year". I will return to such predictions later. From what Mr Atkinson said it seemed to me that a supplement to the existing Bus Xchange would be better than a whole new Exchange. The simplest "supplement" could be achieved by opening up Cashel Street between Colombo and Manchester streets to buses. One could then have an arrangement whereby buses going from West to East would use Lichfield Street while those going from east to West would come along Cashel Street, pick up passengers opposite the present Bus Xchange, then turn left into Colombo Street and right into Tuam Street. A bus from Sumner, for example would then continue on to Avonhead, as at present. This would reduce congestion in Lichfield Street and end the strange arrangement whereby buses going West now head East down Lichfield, go right into Manchester and then into St Asaph Street before finally getting back into Tuam Street near the hospital.

My suggestion would cut across present plans for Cashel Mall and would require the Council to buy one or more of the present shops in Cashel street for an extension to the present Bus Xchange, but I think it should be seriously considered. The pedestrian walkway over Cashel Street with its supports in the centre of the street might be a problem, but if a few lamp-posts were removed from the south side of Cashel street, buses could go along the street and under it.

A less convenient "supplement" to the existing Xchange could be put where the Tuam Street play-centre now is with people perhaps going from the present Xchange to there through a pedestrian tunnel under Lichfield Street just as from Wellington Railway Station there is a tunnel under one road.

If the Cashel Street idea was accepted, the present Plan would only have to make provision for buying room for an extension of the Xchange towards Cashel Street. The cost of major rebuilding could be thought about for the next Plan in three years.

According to the April 26 Christchurch Star, bus trips rose from 1.4 million in March 2005 to 1.51 million in March 2006, an increase of 7.86%. Peter Atkinson talked of annual rises of 10%. How reliable are such predictions? He talked of car-users switching to buses because of petrol price rises, but also of buses in peak hours being unable to keep to schedule because of traffic problems. This might make a switch to cycling just as likely as a switch to buses. One gets the impression that immigrants may use buses more than the average citizen. Immigrant numbers are down somewhat and, now that the cost to ratepayers of more people is becoming clearer, the whole government's immigration policy has become very debateable. In a letter published in the Listener a couple of years ago, I argued that, because of excessive demands on the world's forests etcetera, the world needs to achieve zero human population growth as soon as possible and that, as part of such a goal, New Zealand should aim for zero population growth. New Zealand, I believe, should aim to be an exporter of food, and not an importer of large numbers of people. Elsewhere I have argued that efforts should be made to encourage the growth of smaller centres like Ashburton and to slow down the growth of cities like Christchurch.

Such ideas may not make much progress, but I still think that predictions of a "10% per annum increase in bus patronage" are unreliable.

I have tried to assess present usage of the Bus Xchange. On one occasion people were sitting on 46 of the 156 seats available. Peter Atkinson pointed out that I hadn't counted at a peak time, but he wasn't able to specify with any certainty what would be a "peak time". I suggested that people having to stand for a few minutes while waiting for a bus wasn't an acute concern. He replied, "Is that the kind of service you want?" In exchange for a lower rate increase, my answer would be, "Yes."

So-Called "Living" Streets

At the April meeting of the Central Riccarton Residents' committee, it was pointed out (or claimed) that no-one in Wainui Street wanted the expensive changes that have recently been made and several expressed the view that the result of it all is "a mess" and not an improvement. The changes in my own street, Picton Avenue, which took many months of work, look better, but with Kentucky Fried Chicken at the end of it, the Council plots endlessly collect paper, cartons and other rubbish. All-in-all, our committee members thought that the "living streets" programme is non-essential and, until rate-increases are got under better control, should be sharply cut back or abolished.

An Unsatisfactory Council Approach

From our April meeting discussion, each member of our Committee was given a copy of the 24-page "summary" of the Draft Plan. This repeats 12 times the question: "What do we want?" It was felt that, "What can we afford?" might have been more appropriate and that the sole focus on "What do we want?" smacked of the attitude of spoiled and over-indulged children. Apart from that, who is the "we"? At our February meeting which discussed the "organic waste" issue, it turned out that three members of our Committee had made submissions in support of "Option 3" but I, as Chairman, pointed out that "a majority of submitters" is not "a majority of ratepayers" and that where proposals would increase rates, "a majority of submitters" doesn't mean the proposals should automatically go ahead.

Reading both the "Summary" of the Plan and the 304 page Plan, one can't help being struck by the general tone of "propaganda", by the absence of debate – arguments for and against – and by the almost total absence of detailed information. For instance on page 14 of the "Summary" one finds: *"Tree renewal: costing \$17.2 million."* Seeking more information, for example the number of trees, roughly, that the Council plans to "renew" and turning to page 125 of the larger Plan, one finds in the section on "Parks" etcetera, *"Park specimen trees 48,213"* but no discussion of "renewal" except that "typical renewal periods" for "Park trees" is "every 100 years". When I ring Council I am put onto "an arborist" and get – this seems to be the norm in trying to get information from Council staff – his answer phone. I leave a message and my phone number and, perhaps I will eventually get a reply – I don't know.

As an example of "propaganda" one can take page 13 of the Summary on "Economic Development". I quote:

"What do we want? A sound and evenly-growing economy, with a degree of economic prosperity shared fairly among all Christchurch Residents."

The Government's policy of "increasing freedom of trade" tends to close down local economic production rather than to help it to "grow", and as for "prosperity shared fairly", the Friday before last I was approached in the library by a solo mother whom I know. She wanted \$10 for a little painting she had done so she could put \$10 on her bus metro-card. I bought her painting which I didn't desperately want and walked down to the bus exchange with her. She flats and has, apparently, a bit of lawn – but she told me she mows it with a hand mower that she bought at a Salvation Army shop for \$5. She says the mower has no roller but she manages to cut the grass with it.

Does Mrs McTurk plan to donate \$10,000 from her generous salary so that a thousand of the city's poor can put \$10 on their bus metro-card? If not, I suggest that talking of "economic prosperity shared fairly among all Christchurch residents" is pure propaganda.

Organic Waste Disposal

At our February meeting we passed unanimously, after considerable discussion the motion:

"The meeting supports composting of organic waste, but also supports ideas for reducing the cost of Option 3, eg neighbourhood composting."

It is my view that, with the right incentives, encouragement and grass-roots organisation, many streets could deal with their own organic waste composting. My wife digs holes in the garden into which she throws vegetable peelings, banana skins etcetera. When the hole is nearly full, she covers the organic waste over with soil and digs a new hole. I would be quite happy to compost the organic waste of neighbours with less garden. In some streets with a lot of high density housing organic waste collection by the Council may be desirable, but I believe a sustained attempt should be made to persuade the majority of streets to deal with their own organic waste. One could, for instance, have a city-wide competition, with a one-off reward of \$10 per household for the first streets to achieve the cooperation required to compost in the gardens of the street, the kitchen waste of all the households in the street. Even where there is denser housing with little space for gardens, there should be experiments with composting drums so that the Council might collect, not kitchen waste each week, but perhaps drums of compost less frequently.

Kitchen waste is easier to deal with than tree clippings. One woman on our Committee got rid of her open fire and is now frustrated that she can no longer burn her tree branches. This is an example of how a wrong approach to one problem, air pollution, leads to other problems. Instead of trying to ban open fires, ECan should have got the West Coast to supply Christchurch with smokeless coke to replace coal burning and some wood-burning. At a small fraction of the cost of ECan's "air plan", air pollution could have been reduced while encouraging many householders to burn their own tree branches as I still do since I am determined to keep our open fire with its hot-water producing wetback as long as possible.

Following our February meeting I went to a talk by Tony Moore of the Council staff on the waste disposal issue. From his talk, I got the impression that the main reason for Council's support for Option 3 was the desire to replace manual picking up of rubbish by the mechanical picking up of large bins. Tony Moore said that the manual handling of rubbish containers is too physically stressful for workers. I have doubts as to whether mechanical picking up of larger bins is going to be more efficient and I tend to oppose the idea of getting rid of all manual jobs. Part of the problem with workers results from employing large companies like Onyx to do collections. If, instead, the ideal was to work towards driver-owned rubbish trucks with the driver and his mate or worker doing the job at their own pace, so they didn't get over-stressed and over-strained, the problem of rubbish-collecting workers not turning up would diminish. And "their own pace" wouldn't necessarily be a slow one. I began my working life as a coal-mine trucker on the West Coast before later going to university and, when I started shovelling coal on my first day at work, I well remember one of my two coal miners saying, "For God's sake Mark, slow down." There are plenty of fit young men who don't mind a little manual work. The main thing is to have work conditions which don't over-strain them or make them unfit. I strongly urge that a change to "mechanical picking up" should be tried on a small scale and its efficiency compared to manual handling before large-scale changes are made. There is also the problem that some households would take ages to fill the proposed larger containers, or if they put the larger containers out with hardly anything in them, the proposed new system would be somewhat ridiculous.

The Central City

The Summary Draft Plan says on page 9:

"What do we want? A vibrant central city..." On hearing that my wife, Barbara asked "What is a vibrant city?" A good question. Is it a city centre with lots of loud traffic causing

the air to “vibrate?” Presumably not. The Oxford dictionary defines “vibrant” as “thrilling with something”. How the Council is supposed to provide that I don’t know.

I suspect that if “creating a vibrant central city” is going to increase the rates, most residents would rather have it left the way it is. In its policy of relentless activism, the Council may be impeding a natural process of evolution. If some central buildings becomes unoccupied and therefore a cost to their present owners, that should tend to make them cheaper for developers or new owners with new ideas to buy. Do central businesses and shop-keepers really want \$10.3 million spent on “City Mall renovation” If they have to pay an extra “targeted rate” to pay for it? And if the Council is proposing to spend large sums on things that only a few really want or demand, surely it needs to become a little more genuinely democratic.

And talking of becoming more democratic, I have been conducting a local phone-poll on the issue of the proposed sale of half of the Port of Lyttelton to a Chinese company. Since The Press supports the sale, I expected public opinion to be fairly evenly balanced. I try to do the poll in as unbiased a manner as possible, avoiding giving my own opinion on the matter, but so far I haven’t found a single person who supports the idea. Something has clearly gone wrong with democratic decision-making when, on February 8 this year, Councillors listened, one gathers, to a fairly one-sided presentation on this issue and then, immediately, without any attempt to consult ratepayers, decided, with one abstention, to support the sale of half of the port into foreign ownership. No-one expects consultation on every issue – that can become very inefficient – but on really major issues, such indifference to public opinion is deplorable.

Civil Defence Building

“3.6 million” is budgeted for a Civil Defence building. It is my understanding that ECan has a civil defence bunker and that, for some reason, the Council decided to take Civil Defence away from ECan. I suggest that decision should be reconsidered and possibly reversed.

A New Headquarters

By some sort of financial conjuring trick, an attempt has been made to remove the issue of a new Council HQ building from the area of public discussion or comment. This is unacceptable. The issue was discussed at our March committee meeting. Howard Dawson, a young lawyer on our committee, argued that, in the present Council Offices, working conditions for some staff aren’t very good. In reply to that, it was suggested that office space could be hired in existing central city buildings, rather than building a new Headquarters at this stage. Ordinary people who have to live within their income have to put up with certain things. For instance, our living room carpet badly needs renewing, but I paid a \$324 quarterly rates bill last Friday, I have an unpaid dentist’s bill, and having broken another tooth last Wednesday, I have another dentist’s appointment this Thursday. \$800,000 having been spent refurbishing the existing Council Offices, I believe the issue of a new Council HQ building should be put aside for three years until the next Plan. Getting general Council spending under better control should be given priority, and not immediately going ahead with a huge new building should be part of that “control”.

Branching Out?

On page 10 of the Draft Summary we are told that the Council will provide “16 Early Learning Centres” and the Council will operate “three of these”.

In response to such items, one can't help wondering: Shouldn't this sort of thing be the responsibility of the government Education Department?

When under "Economic Development" (p 13) one reads of "assistance" with "globalisation services", with of course, no detail provided, one does wonder whether the Council places any limits on its imagined "Empire" to expand which some poor ratepayers are to be driven out of their homes to help pay for it all. The same page refers to "Relocation of 40 skilled migrants to Christchurch each year". Are the ratepayers ever to find out the benefits of the "40 skilled migrants" who were brought to Christchurch last year? Accountability to ratepayers requires that such details should be available.

Conclusion

The lack of detailed information in the Plan and the difficulty of obtaining such information means that before the May 5 deadline, no thorough assessment of the Plan is possible. It took me, for instance, 24 hours to eventually find out, from Tony Armstrong that, at an annual cost of \$1.72 million, the Council plans to replace 1,200 trees per annum which comes to \$1,433 per tree. Mr Armstrong said half of these would be park trees, and half trees associated with the "street renewal" programme. If the so-called "Living Streets" programme was cut back to reduce the proposed rate rise, it follows that there would be some savings on "tree renewal" costs.

The main aim of my submission has been to argue that it is possible to make enough subtractions from the proposed Plan to reduce the proposed rate increase from nearly 10% to no more than 5%.

I strongly maintain that, at a time when people are suffering from substantial price rises for such things as petrol, annual rate increases of 10% are not acceptable. Therefore it seems to me that all Councillors and staff should look at the details of the Plan more thoroughly than I have been able to do in the short time available, and should delay or trim spending proposals to halve the proposed rate increase.

If they can manage that, I and other ratepayers will be deeply grateful.