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5<sup>th</sup> May 2006.

Submissions to Christchurch City Long Term Council Community Plan.

In late december 2005 the CCC and myself were part of a court procedure relating to my property, a small garage in a complex of 150 others. The cost to myself, and by all accounts the council, of several thousand dollars was in order to settle a dispute over what amounted to a sum of less than \$100. That this dispute related to councils failure to provide a service, yet continue to charge for it, and that I went to considerable lengths to deal with it in a more reasoned manner, is particularly annoying.

As a result of this action and what took place prior to it, along with subsequent behaviour, it is obvious that the present council system does not serve its clients or their properties particularly well, and that there are significant issues council should address.

I note in the draft LTCCP that the council CEO speaks of being far more responsive to needs, and the onus to consult. Also I read of fewer performance measures but that they are purported to be more meaningful. Some of my statements and requests below will deal with a clients perspective on this. I am additionally mindful that, unfortunately at this time, ratepayers have no alternative means of obtaining some services and so the competitive need for excellence in service delivery and customer satisfaction is somewhat muted. I am no fan of big sticks and indeed council culture should ensure that staff and councillors alike should want to strive for excellence and satisfaction but I have concerns that this vision is sometimes lost. Council should not only be human and flexible but know that satisfied customers are not just those that always receive what they ask for but those that are fairly charged for what they ask for and not had something else added in to top the bill up, so to speak, in favour of other people desires.

In the face of huge cost increases it is necessary that council take a critical look at its decisions over what to fund, and how it allocates the benefits and costs. The present attempt to reduce costs appears woefully inadequate given the enormity and longevity of projected increases and I consider council should be making greater use of the word necessity rather than want when it assesses its activities, and that it direct costs to lay where they are incurred. In this regard I, generally, approve of the thrust of Vol 2 of the LTCCP.

I will speak on these matters more directly and specifically during the course of the submission process but in short my submissions are that:

• Council establish a policy on arbitration for matters in dispute relating to items less than \$1000, and/or that such matters be referred to the Disputes Tribunal as opposed to the district court. Rationale: relates to expediency, reasonableness and cost-effectiveness.

• Council improve rates demand notices to clearly define what services ratepayers are paying for. To clarify – exactly what the UAGC comprises, what the general rate comprises and what it does for that property. Rationale: transparency and fairness.

Council abolish the UAGC and establish a greater level of uniform and flat targeted rates that bear relation to what services are provided a property. *Rationale:* In proportion to the value of my property the UAGC represents a much greater cost than almost any other property in the city. I receive almost no definable services from the council, a small garage can make no use of galleries, libraries, sewerage, and the like yet I am forced to pay for these. This is unjust and demonstrates the unfairness of lumping almost all service costs into one general or uniform rate.

Council establish a separate rate for rubbish services. *Rationale:* My original dispute was over councils non-supply of rubbish bags, the only definable service I did receive. Had this been separately rated, and council chose not to supply then there would have been no dispute, likewise to any other property that council chooses not to supply. Clearly a matter of equity and fairness.

Council establish a policy on responsibility and responsiveness to its customers. *Rationale:* During the course of this recent court action several attempts to deal with the matter prior to court were ignored completely. No response was ever received and despite recommendations made to council as a result of the court action no subsequent correspondence has been received. Neither has a corrected account yet to be presented. A matter of common decency and good manners, let alone good relations.

Council establish a policy on significance and consultation in relation to specific property services and charges. *Rationale:* As an example in my case council decided to not supply a service with no consultation, nor even notify me of this change. As this was a significant and arguably the only service received by this property that was clearly a substantial change. Such changes should be the subject of consultation with individuals affected. There is an implied contract between council as a service provider and the ratepayer as a client and thus any change should be subject to **meaningful** discourse. Likewise any change to property charges or council costs in present or additional areas, in excess of the CPI, should be a matter for direct consultation. Where this affects a group of properties there should be provision for binding referenda and specific implications for council failure to act accordingly.

Council establish a policy on implications of failure to act reasonably. *Rationale:* Since ratepayers have no choice in service provider then council, and council staff, have an increased obligation to act reasonably and in accordance with accepted practices in the community. This includes 'putting things right' where matters have become unacceptable, where mistakes have been made, poor or inadequate service supplied. It is not acceptable to merely pay lip service to such things, responsibility should mean just that – with clear implications in the case of significant or protracted failure.

Council have policy on the use of independent assessors on major financial issues. *Rationale:* Over the past year we had been repeatedly and publically told that rate rises for the next few years would be in the 3 or possibly 4 percent range. Yet at the last minute almost such rises are now predicted to be three times this amount. It would be beholden on council to establish a means of assessing and checking such major information independently to ensure a thorough review is done and more accurate details made available to ratepayers and councillors.

Council establish policy on the professional nature of reports to council. *Rationale:* In order to make a decision on things council often request and/or receive reports on specific matters. It has been noted by ratepayers that a some of these reports contain emotive terms that could conceivably be construed as attempting to influence a decision rather than providing totally accurate information. An example would be something like "these ratepayers want one group to pay more where they pay less". More accurately and less

emotively this might read “group A would pay the full cost (or some percentage) where group B pay a different percentage” followed by the rationale behind the options perhaps. Emotion and influence of this nature is perhaps more the preserve of councillors and ratepayers but not report writers.

Council set bounds on its responsibilities and service requirements. *Rationale:* Clearly one reason for the high cost of council, and thus to its ratepayers, is the increasing number of things that council takes on beyond supplying services such as water, waste treatment or removal, roads and suchlike. Where council activities are in competition with, or supplemental to private or Government supply council should reduce or cease the activity. Where in contemplation of an activity council should consider such the presence of other suppliers, the particular **necessity** vs want for an activity and who will *directly benefit* vs who will *directly pay*. Council should be mindful of responsibility to property and community service, but that this does not necessarily equate to moral or philanthropic direction.

Council set bounds and directives on and to CCHL. *Rationale:* It has been reported that CCHL wish to become involved in other activities, for example the provision of broadband services. I consider it is not CCHL’s role, and nor do they have experience, in beginning ventures which contain significant risk. It is CCHL’s to mind the family silver, conservatively, so that this silver is useable by future generations and not put at risk. Where ratepayers wish to become involved themselves in such ventures there is already adequate provision in the marketplace for them to do so.

Council make clear its determination and procedure of benefit and cost allocation. *Rationale:* In determining the allocation of costs to general or targeted rates council presumably determines the area and extent of benefit. This determination should be made public, the mechanism by which it occurs should be open for rigorous debate and inspection. The previously mentioned policy on significance should take place during the process of benefit determination and meaningful consultation take place.

Please note that I wish to speak on these submissions and that I anticipate completion of such discourse should take approximately one hour. I also note that I am prepared to provide further time and access to resource should council desire.

Luke Pickering.