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Corporate Plan Output: Parks Plans and Policy Statements and New Assets - Reserve Purchases	

This report is being submitted to the Riccarton/Wigram Community Board for its comment and to the Parks and Recreation Committee for its consideration and recommendation to the Council.

#### PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to recommend City Council participation in a joint purchase with Selwyn District Council and the Government Forest Heritage Fund of Gibraltar Farm on the Port Hills for a scenic reserve.



#### INTRODUCTION

The owner of Gibraltar Farm approached the Parks Unit several years ago with an offer of sale on the south-west Port Hills. An application to the Forest Heritage Fund for purchase funding support in 1996 did not produce any tangible results. The option of purchase was then taken up in 1997 by Wai-Ora Forest Landscapes who negotiated with the owner and succeeded in gaining a Forest Heritage Fund grant of \$80,000 plus GST. However as Wai-Ora had insufficient funds to purchase the property they approached Parks Unit and Selwyn District Council with a view to the two Councils taking up the purchase option and the government grant.

The city's Property Unit, on behalf of Selwyn District Council and the city has now reached an agreement to purchase 117 hectares of Gibraltar Farm at the head of the Otahuna Valley on the Port Hills subject to City Council and Selwyn District Council approval. The Selwyn District Council and Forest Heritage Fund have already allocated funds toward the purchase, although the Fund is awaiting its Minister's signature to allow formal transfer of the grant from Wai-Ora to the city.

City Council involvement in this project will consist of:

- (a) The contribution of one third of the property purchase price resulting in half ownership of the land with Selwyn District Council.
- (b) Management of the Park by the city's Port Hills ranger service.
- (c) Gradual development of the park by the City Council.

The discussions that have been held so far with Selwyn District staff and Councillors on joint purchase of the property have been a major step forward in cross territorial co-operation in the creation of an enhanced Port Hills Parks system.

#### **GIBRALTAR FARM**

The property is situated on the southern Port Hills in Selwyn District approximately 3.5km from the city boundary. A site plan is attached. It adjoins the Summit Road and is close to Coopers Knob Scenic Reserve, one of a string of City Council managed reserves along the upper part of the Port Hills.

The property consists of the upper part of a major spur line and major gully adjoining the Summit Road. It also contains the mid section of an adjoining gully in which Otahuna Bush is situated. The property extends from approximately the 180m contour in a gully up to the 460m contour at the Summit Road.

Gibraltar Farm's 117ha contains two high value native bush remnants known as: Block VI, and Otahuna Bush, covering an area of approximately 42ha including 8ha of a 500+ year old totara-matai forest. The two native bush areas, and kanuka patches, are situated on the north and south margins of the bush blocks. This landscape pattern is largely a result of the impact of logging and burning followed by 150 years of management for agricultural purposes. The property is situated in the Port Hills Ecological District.

#### **REGIONAL PARKS CONTEXT**

Gibraltar Farm is a strategic part of the planned 'Crater Rim Forest Park' portion of a wider Port Hills regional park concept, which will be presented to the Council in March. The Crater Rim Forest proposal has been rapidly gaining momentum over the last few years based on Council and community efforts to protect and expand the last stands of native bush left on the southern and harbour portions of the Port Hills and to enhance the scenic landscape of the Summit Road corridor. Gibraltar Farm is situated at the wetter end (Sugarloaf/Hoon Hay to Coopers Knob) of the Port Hills. This area is the best in the Christchurch area for the protection and enhancement of large expanses of native forest because it is climatically and historically appropriate (forested last century) and contains sizeable areas of regenerating native bush.

Purchase of this property would make restoration of a relatively continuous tract of native forest in this area of the Port Hills a much more realistic future planning option. A future forest of 200 to 500+ha is a practical and realistic option for this area of the Port Hills based around the existing Christchurch City Council managed reserves, Prendergasts Bush and Gibraltar Farm.

Community concerns about the future of the Port Hills and their native forests have led to a number of major conservation initiatives taking place over the last six years. These are:

- Native Bird Survey of the Port Hills by Andrew Crossland, commissioned by Parks Unit - 1992. This report provides estimates of Port Hills bird numbers and locations as well as comment on the importance of Port Hills bush remnants to the city.
- Purchase of three continuous major bush blocks above Governors Bay adjoining city scenic reserves by the Summit Road Society with assistance from Forest Heritage Fund.
- Donation of Reuter property above Governors Bay to the City for a scenic reserve.
- Purchase of Prendergasts Bush adjoining Council's Coopers Knob reserve by the Gama Foundation for conservation and public benefit.
- Extension of Kennedys Bush Reserve in 1998 by the City Council.
- Launch of millennium celebration Port Hills 2000 Crater Rim Native Forest project.

The above community and Council initiatives combined with the framework provided by the existing Summit Road reserves has moved the vision of a Crater Rim Native Forest Park from a possible longer term land use option to an achievable objective within 5-10 years. The city has a major role to play in this project as the representative of the majority of users, a key land owner, and the main provider of recreation facilities and ranger services for the Summit Road area.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITIES AND PARKS CONTEXT**

Gibraltar Farm is one of the three highest rated properties evaluated for possible park acquisition on the Port Hills by the Parks Unit.

The property's two bush patches were both highly graded botanically in the 1992 survey of Banks Peninsula indigenous remnants. On an A-E scale Otahuna Bush is A graded and Bush Block VI a B+. Currently the understorey condition of the bush patches is very poor condition due to the impact of goats, stock and other grazing animals. Eventual loss of the bush is inevitable once the canopy trees die as few replacement plants are able to establish in co existence with existing grazing practices. Gorse spraying in past years has also had a detrimental affect on native trees around the perimeter of Otahuna Bush. Fencing, stock exclusion and noxious animal control is the solution to the problems that are afflicting many Port Hills bush remnants.



*Otahuna Bush understorey destroyed by stock & noxious animals*

#### **Otauna Bush**

Otahuna bush is regarded as one of the two best bush patches of its type on the Port Hills. This 8ha matai- totara-kahikatea mixed hardwood forest represents a forest type more or less similar to those forming parts of the forest vegetation of Banks Peninsula prior to human arrival. Its lineage probably dates back thousands of years. The largest individual totara trees could be around 600-700 years old. There is only about 47ha of this 'old growth' type of forest left on the Port Hills. On Banks peninsula remnants of 'old growth' forest are tiny fragments, occupying only about 800ha in all, which is less than 1% of their pre- human extent and about 1.2% of their extent 150 years ago at the beginning of the European impact. Hugh Wilson, the botanist who surveyed Banks Peninsula made the following comments on Otahuna Bush after his field survey in M 1986; Some excerpts from his field notes; *"abundance of adult and regenerating lowland totara and matai, and the presence of Kahikatea are outstanding features. This is the best remnant of lowland podocarp hardwood forest left in the district. Also in the defined RAP area are fine kanuka stands on sharply drained, rather open ground, with a forest floor sward of drought tolerant, mostly native grasses. The extensive population of velvet fern is another outstanding feature; the fern is uncommon nationally, and local on Banks Peninsula, and a rarity on the Port Hills. Cabbage trees and lancewoods are common. Two species of tree ferns (silver & soft leaved) occur, with some regeneration."*

## **Adjoining Reserves and Conservation Recreation Areas**

Two important Council reserves, Ahuriri and Coopers Knob, are situated within 1.5 km of Gibraltar Farm. The northern end of Coopers Knob Scenic Reserve is within a few hundred metres of the top of Gibraltar Farm. The privately owned (purchased 1997) conservation area of Prendergasts Bush (part of the Coopers Knob bush complex) is situated in the next valley. The Crater Rim Walkway runs parallel to the Summit Road uphill of the farm. Other nearby forest remnants can be included as funds allow in the future. An adjoining landowner owns a strip of pasture land about 150m wide between the main bush block and the adjoining landmark, Gibraltar Rock that can be clearly seen from the Halswell/Westlake area. In the future it would be desirable to link Gibraltar Farm with Gibraltar Rock & the adjoining private conservation area of Prendergasts Bush in the next valley.

This will have recreation and scenic benefits for visitors to this area of the Summit Road Corridor.

### **GIBRALTAR FARM PURCHASE - OBJECTIVES**

The main purchase objectives are to:

- Protect a 500+ yr old native forest and encourage expansion of regenerating bush.
- Enhance & protect the scenic quality of the Summit Road corridor.
- Enhance water quality and reduce soil erosion.
- Enhance native wildlife which should increase native bird numbers visiting the city.
- Encourage public use of area through links to the Port Hills walkway network.
- Provide employment and training opportunities.
- Develop 'hands on' land care education partnerships with local schools.



*Ancient totara, Otahuna Bush*

The primary aim in the purchase of the Gibraltar Farm would be to protect and restore an area of ecologically sustainable and aesthetically attractive native forest area in an area of high scenic value.

#### **COMMUNITY USE**

The primary benefactors of this purchase would be Christchurch residents. Recent survey work indicates that around 90% of Summit Road users originating in the three local authorities that have an interest in the Port Hills (city, Selwyn & Banks Peninsula) come from Christchurch City. It is estimated that about 6% of local district Summit Road users come from Selwyn District. The importance to the city of areas adjacent to the Summit Road can be gauged by the area's popularity with the public with 203,000 local vehicle borne visitors and 59,000 tourists estimated to use the Port Hills west of the Kiwi each year. Overall 77% of these visitors come from Christchurch City.

The Regional Council who are prepared to provide technical support for the project has indicated interest in the restoration of Gibraltar Farm. The Regional Council considers that the property has regional importance in respect of its biodiversity and potential educational value to future generations of school children in learning the concepts of sustainable management.

The Government's Forest Heritage Fund has also agreed to contribute funds towards the purchase.

Land Care are very interested in the land being secured for community and scientific purposes and have proposed the setting of up field trials on the property to help define best practices for restoration of indigenous habitat.

Wai-Ora Trust have a special interest in the property having been involved with gaining the Forest Heritage Fund grant and undertaking initial negotiations with the owner. They would be very interested in assisting with planting etc through their community work schemes. At a community level, the 'Addington Bush Society' network, are very interested in participating in restoration work to complement their urban based work.

The extent of community and other organisation involvement in development and maintenance of the potential park requires further investigation, however work toward the property's purchase has thus far been very much a co-operative organisational/community effort.

#### **MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

Christchurch City Council and Selwyn District Council would jointly own the property. Selwyn District Council currently does not have the infrastructure or funds to provide any significant contribution to the park's management or development. It is envisaged that a 'Friends' of the park type of organisation could be an appropriate mechanism to enable other organisations and community groups to be involved with the park or the wider Crater Rim Native Forest Park vision.

## **EXPENDITURE**

### **Development Costs (total)**

	\$
1. Boundary fencing	12,000
2. Internal fencing	7,800
3. Boundary & enhancement planting (up to 1.5ha -plant cost only)	30,000
4. Interpretation (tracks, signs, etc)	5,000
	<u>54 800</u>

### **Maintenance Costs (average annual)**

	\$
1. Fencing Maintenance	500
2. Animal control (goats, possums, etc part of wider program)	200
3. Interpretation (tracks, signs, etc)	1,200
4. Boundary control (keeping gorse away from boundaries)	3,000
	<u>4,900</u>

The top development priority for the property would be to secure the boundaries and protect the existing native bush areas. Progressive retirement of the property from grazing would then proceed until the majority of the property was covered in native bush. A limited amount of planting may be undertaken on a voluntary basis. The property's gorse is not considered to be a problem, except along boundaries which have to be kept clear to avoid spread of gorse into neighbours properties, as it will eventually be naturally overtaken by regenerating natives. Eventually costs will be limited to fence maintenance interpretation/track provision and noxious animal control.

## **SOURCE OF FUNDS**

Agreement to acquire the property has been reached with the property's owner subject to the conditions contained within the public excluded section of this report.

### **Parks Administration Programme 1998-99**

Key:

D - District Park

N - Neighbourhood Park

G - Garden Park

C/PH - Conservation/Port Hills

C/PL - Conservation/Plains

C/WW - Conservation Waterways and Wetlands

The total reserve purchase vote for the 1998-99 year is \$1,7007,507. The following purchases have already been committed for this financial year.

			x\$1,000
C/PH	Kennedy's Bush Extension		170
N	Walnut Tree Park Extension		180
C/WW	Drayton Reserve Extension	(50% WS)	60
N	Moa Reserve ROW		45
N	Rugby Reserve		750
C/WW	Horseshoe lake Extension		80
N	Sumner Croquet		300
			\$1,585,000

To date around 80% of the committed reserve purchase fund has been spent on local reserves.

## CONCLUSION

Port Hills Parks by their nature tend to provide greater benefit (ecological, recreation, scenic, landscape) than their immediate locality might suggest. For this reason there has been widespread community and institutional co-operation in this potential purchase ie:

- Willing seller with sympathy to the overall conservation and social objectives of the project.
- Purchase initiated and promoted by Wai-Ora Trust, a community based conservation/employment training organisation interested in sites for community projects.
- \$80,000 plus GST purchase grant from the Government funded Forest Heritage Fund.
- One third each of purchase price provided by City Council & Selwyn District Council.
- Management support from Regional Council and research interest from Land Care Research.
- Support from Port Hills 2000 which sees the purchase as highly complementary to their Port Hills objectives.
- Management and maintenance of the property provided Christchurch City Council - representing the majority of future users of the resource, and whose Parks Unit runs the Port Hills largest and most comprehensive park support system (Gebbies Pass to Godley Head).

By supporting this purchase the City Council can make a significant contribution toward sustainable management of a high value scenic and natural heritage area, as well as increasing recreation, employment, training and education opportunities in an area important to many Christchurch residents. This purchase will bring the vision of major native forest park on the city's back door a significant step forward.



The above report was referred to the February meeting of the Riccarton/Wigram Community Board. The Board was very supportive of the proposed reserve acquisition.

- Recommendation:**
1. That the purchase of Gibraltar Farm for a Scenic Reserve pursuant to section 19(1)a of the Reserves Act 1977 be approved subject to the recommendations contained in the public excluded section of this report.
  2. That the City Council be responsible for control and management of the reserve in consultation with Selwyn District Council as required.

**Chairman's**

**Recommendation:** That the above recommendation be adopted.