

15. STYX RIVER ESPLANADE RESERVE

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The purpose of this report is to seek support for entering into purchase negotiations with a property owner in Radcliffe Road. A separate report seeking approval to purchase can be expected if the negotiations are successful. The committee is being asked to give special consideration to this purchase proposal because, while the opportunity has arisen funding would not normally be available within the Water Services Unit budget until 2002/03.

This report will be presented to the Strategy and Resources Committee at its October meeting because of the request being made to fund the purchase from unspecified capital funding 2001/02. The recommendation of this committee will be reported to the Strategy & Resources meeting.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPERTY

Details of the property and the market valuation are the subject of a separate report in the public excluded section of this agenda.

BACKGROUND

The owner approached the Waterways and Wetlands Team, in regard to issues associated with subdividing his land into three four hectare lifestyle blocks. He was aware of the importance that the community and the council placed on the Styx River and wished to work with the Council in achieving the rivers high ecological and recreational potential. During these discussions the owner has been approached by a person wishing to buy the whole property. He supports the Council's long-term objectives for this river and is giving the Council first option on the property. Although he does not require settlement until the next financial year (2001–2002), he is seeking an early answer in order that he can resolve his financial affairs.

CONTEXT

The Styx River, its associated tributaries and artificial waterways constitute one of the three major spring-fed river catchments in the Christchurch area. The Styx River itself is 23.8 kilometres in length extending from Nunweek Park to the west and flowing north eastwards to the sea via Brooklands Lagoon and the Waimakariri River. The upper catchment flows partly through suburban areas, but the majority flows through rural industrial (particularly Smacks and Kaputone Streams) and rural land uses. The largely rural landscape character associated with the Styx River gives this river its uniqueness. It also forms an important functioning part of the natural drainage system of the northern part of the city. Various investigations indicate that it has high ecological, landscape, recreational, cultural and heritage values.

The Styx River is given priority in the Strategic Open Space Strategy and the Waterways and Wetlands Natural Asset Management Strategy.

Most wetlands associated with the Styx River have been extensively drained with a network of deep artificial channels. In the Drainage Utilities Asset Management Strategy, these timber-lined drains are, wherever possible, being replaced with naturalised waterways.

ISSUES

Water Quality

Research into water quality, particularly within the riverbed gravels of the Styx River, indicates that it is degraded and having an affect on trout spawning (NIWA). Opportunities to improve the quality of runoff from rural properties and to prevent stock access to the waterways need to be maximised.

Rural Subdivision

Extensive rural subdivision resulting in 4ha lifestyle blocks is occurring around the perimeter of the city, particularly to the north in the vicinity of the Styx River. These subdivisions will determine the pattern of future residential subdivision and therefore city form. It is vital that we work with landowners in order to achieve the best outcomes.

Reserve Contribution

Reserve contribution at the time of residential development is inadequate to achieve long-term sustainable management of the waterways and wetlands within this area. We need to take advantage of the opportunity of acquiring land at rural prices.

Opportunity Cost

If the Council decides not to work with the landowner and purchase the land at this time then the opportunity to do so may be lost for many years. When the opportunity does occur again the land will be more expensive, may even be unaffordable and could well be subdivided into several smaller lots with boundaries adjacent to the Styx River.

PROPOSAL

Objectives

The proposal seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- Reduce the length of timbered lined drain and thus provide long term financial savings
- Improve the quality of water entering the Styx River
- Provide a large green corridor that will provide ecological habitat and linkages for native bush bird species
- Enhance the habitat for wetland bird species

- Provide recreational opportunities through the development of boating access and walkways that will in the long-term connect to other walkways upstream and downstream, particularly with Janet Stewart Reserve
- Improve road safety along Radcliffe Road through the removal of a large wooden drain alongside this road

Description

The proposal seeks to purchase the total block, subdivide off what is needed to achieve the objectives and on sell or swap what is not needed. Two 4ha allotments will be retained for this purpose in order to maximise the return on the land.

The purchase of the block could enable the total length of drains in this vicinity to be reduced by 408m, with a long-term saving of \$200,000 in re-timbering costs.

This would be achieved by:

- (a) Interconnecting Radcliffe Road Drain and Mundys Drain. Four hundred metres of Radcliffe Road Drain south of Radcliffe Road would then be abandoned, a stretch of drain that needs replacement.
- (b) Realignment of the two existing drains within the block. This rearrangement of existing drainage may be possible and a 100m length of deep road side drain relocated further from the road edge. Survey work is currently underway to confirm the practicality of drain realignment, which may also allow a 300m reach of nearly flat graded drain, north of Radcliffe Road to also be abandoned.

The drains to be retained will be realigned and enhanced in order to achieve a wide range of values. The new restored waterways within the two 4ha allotments to be on sold will be given land protection prior to sale.

A large wetland will be created to treat rural water runoff from these drains prior to it being discharged into the Styx River.

Andrew Crossland, the Council's consultant ornithologist, has commented as follows:

This area will also provide habitat for wetland bird species such as Pukeko, Mallard, Spur-winged Plover and New Zealand Kingfisher, as well as visiting Little Cormorant, White-faced Heron, Grey Duck, Harrier, Southern Black-backed gull, Red-billed Gull, and Welcome Swallow.

The existing trees and lower woody vegetation lining the river as well as the fruit trees in the orchard support a range of native and exotic land birds. Most notable among these are Fantail, Silvereye, Grey Warbler and Pheasant. With denser planting along parts of the riverbank and on the terrace (utilising native plant species and retaining some of the fruit trees) a sizeable area of high quality "bush" habitat could be created. This could potentially attract and support additional native bush bird species including Bellbird, Shining Cuckoo and Kereru (Native Pigeon).

The creation of a sizeable wooded area on the block (particularly one that holds significant food sources—fruits, berries, flowers, etc) will not only become a component of this corridor, but it will also attract birds in its own right (a “food magnet”) and can be expected to increase native bird abundance and species richness in areas adjacent.

Comments from the City Streets Unit indicate that the removal of the timber lined drain will improve road safety and allow for future road widening. Although it is anticipated that the development of a large supermarket on the corner of Radcliffe Road and main North Road will increase traffic from the current average daily volume of 500 vpd, it is not yet considered a priority to widen Radcliffe Road. The creation of the esplanade reserve from could also provide an important safe cycleway link.

Canoe access, car parking, walking tracks, horse riding and a centre for various activities indicates possible use of this area by the community. This will require further discussions and input from the wider community. It is also anticipated that the community will become extensively involved in the restoration of this area.

DEVELOPMENT

Restoration of the esplanade reserve adjacent to the Styx River will be staged over a number of years with funding coming from the waterways and wetlands annual capital budget.

The restoration of the boxed drains will be funded by substitution from Waterways and Wetlands restoration, restoration technique development. Some of the timbering will be salvaged for urgent repair work while the rest is sold.

The Parks Planning Team Leader comments:

The proposed acquisition on the Styx River is supported as a strategic conservation area and as a drainage enhancement. The site is, however, a low public profile area and as such uses like horse riding have been suggested. While I have no objection to this suggestion, I would like to suggest an alternative use for 3-4 ha of the land on the land to the north of the river.

Many of the city’s cemeteries are becoming full and land is being actively sought for new cemeteries, there has also been considerable demand over the years for memorial or commemorative planting areas ie for weddings, 21st birthdays, etc. I would like to suggest that part of the site could be used to provide an alternative to Belfast Cemetery (subject to detailed site investigations) or at least be used for commemorative planting.

Recommendation: That negotiations be entered into with the property owner for 13.5190 hectares of rural land adjacent to the Styx River.

Deputy Chairman’s

Recommendation: That the above recommendation be adopted.