

15. SOUTHSHORE BEACH PARK - DUNE MANAGEMENT POLICIES

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Corporate Plan Output: Regional Parks – Foreshore/Beach Parks 9.4.34	

The purpose of this report is to present the results of a survey of residents, recently carried out in the Southshore and South Brighton areas.

The aim of the survey was to seek community views regarding the management of the beachfront sand dune reserve area at Southshore. The results presented will assist the Board in the consideration of management policy changes proposed for the Christchurch Beaches and Coastal Parks Management Plan.

INTRODUCTION

The Christchurch City Council's Coast Care programme recently conducted a postal survey of 1,750 Southshore and South New Brighton households, seeking community views regarding the management and extension of public walkways, and the management of vegetation for firebreaks, along the beachfront sand dune reserve area at Southshore. The survey arose out of a report presented to the Board on 31 July 2000. The report sought to address issues of significant concern to the community and Coast Care staff including fire risk, private encroachment, public access, dune erosion and the illegal dumping of garden and building waste on Recreation Reserve lands.

The area under consideration in the survey is the dune-land recreation reserve (RS 40856), extending for 1.6km along the beach dunes from Caspian Street to Tern Street and adjoining directly with private properties accessed off Rocking Horse Road. Approximately 50% of the length of the boundary is unformed road reserve in three separate sections (refer to attached Appendix 1).

The reserve is managed by the City Council under policies set out in the Christchurch Beaches and Coastal Parks Management Plan 1995. The policies focus on the environmental protection and ecological restoration of the coastal sand dunes, as well as allowing for, and managing, the competing residential and recreational interests and impacts on this dynamic but vulnerable ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

The 1993 draft Beaches and Coastal Parks Plan proposed a continuous (where possible) public walking track, now known as the Southern Pegasus Bay Track, through the coastal dunes from the Waimakiriri River to the Southshore Spit. At that time the Southshore Ratepayers' Association objected to these preliminary plans for the track through 'their' area, on the grounds that it would reduce privacy and security and increase the hazard of fire and vandalism. The section of track which was to wind its way through the dunes, from Caspian Street to Tern Street, was removed from the 1995 plan and the track stopped from proceeding any further south than Caspian Street. However, provisions were made to allow for the reassessment of this situation in the future, and this is being undertaken now.

Over the last five years most of the Southern Pegasus Bay Track has been formed, as far south as Caspian Street. Its growing popularity as a recreational pathway, along with various Parks and Waterways Unit management concerns, has now prompted a formal review of the possibility of reinstating the track to Tern Street, as suggested in the original plans (refer to attached Appendix 2).

At the April meeting of the Parks and Recreation Committee, the Southshore Ratepayers' Association made representations regarding the proposed extension to the Southern Pegasus Bay Track between Caspian Street and Tern Street. The Committee recommended that further consultation be undertaken by the Board with local residents on this matter. The survey outlined in this report is the major consultation exercise undertaken with local residents.

THE SURVEY

The survey was mailed to all 1,750 households in the South Brighton and Southshore areas, from Bridge Street to the Southshore Spit. The survey area was chosen to reflect both those residents most directly affected by the policy proposals and those already using or most likely to make use of the area if access was available. The questionnaire, with a freepost return, prompted a response from 12% (209) of the households in the local community - 77 residents from the Southshore area (Rocking Horse Road and adjacent streets), 69 residents living in the South New Brighton area, and 63 residents who did not give an address. A number of personal letters were also received offering comments on the questions posed. There were three respondents who did not answer any questions as they believed the issues did not affect them. Some others did not give an answer all the questions, only answering one or two questions.

The four questions in the survey targeted two main issues of concern for the management of the Southshore dune area. Firstly, the lack of formal guidelines for firebreak management between the reserve and adjacent private properties. Secondly, the debate about pedestrian and (consequently) management access through the length of the reserve.

FIREBREAK MANAGEMENT

The 1995 Plan identified fire as a hazard but did not provide any policy or practical guidelines for implementation. Since then some neighbours have expressed their concerns regarding the lack of a firebreak between themselves and the densely vegetated reserve. The dune-land area from Caspian Street to Tern Street is rugged and undulating and does not have a managed fire strip to protect housing. This situation is different from that on the western side of Rocking Horse Road, where the council mows a 5-8 metre strip along the entire boundary.

New Zealand Fire Service staff from the New Brighton station suggest a 5 metre wide buffer is appropriate. A strip could be either mown or planted with various fire resistant species, preferably native, but may include exotics such as ice plant. Presently some properties have no managed firebreak between themselves and the reserve and residents have not recently voiced any concerns.

Other property owners have used their concern as a pretext to mow and develop large areas of reserve land adjacent to their properties. These clearances now give the appearance of private lawns extending from adjacent housing.

Residents were asked two questions relating to firebreak management:

1. Whether firebreak management on the public recreation reserve at Southshore should be carried out by adjacent residents with Council guidelines, or by Council staff with community input.
2. If a 5 metre wide firebreak/buffer between housing and the reserve is acceptable.

Results of this survey are illustrated by Figures 1 and 2.

Q1. Responsibility of firebreak management

Southshore residents are quite divided in terms of who should be responsible for firebreak management. Forty (52%) of the 75 survey returns suggest that a consistent policy is required, and that Council staff should undertake the work. However, the remaining 37 respondents (48%) feel that the residents themselves would manage the area in a more constant manner. They live there and could monitor maintenance and management of the firebreak on a day-to-day basis, it being in their own interest to do so for reasons of safety.

Other residents from the South New Brighton area, and those who responded anonymously, took a much firmer stance on this matter. Forty-nine (73%) of South New Brighton survey returns and 39 (63%) of those who replied anonymously have strongly opted for the management to be undertaken by Council staff with community input. They comment that residents should not be relied upon or expected to all share the same attitude, and that it is impractical to expect residents to carry out a management role when they would obviously have work and family commitments. They suggest that Council involvement will provide a more uniform approach, thus eliminating areas of risk if left up to residents alone, as some residents may choose not to participate.

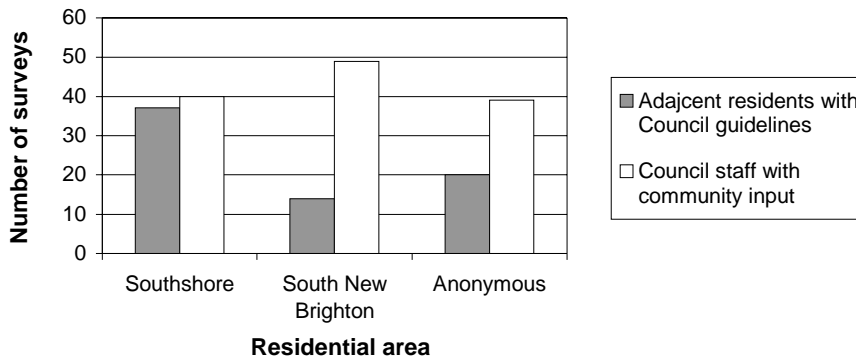


Figure 1: Response of survey participants to the question of who should be responsible for firebreak management on the public recreational reserve at Southshore.

Q2. Width of firebreak

The width of the firebreak appears to have produced a clear response in support of the five metre proposal.

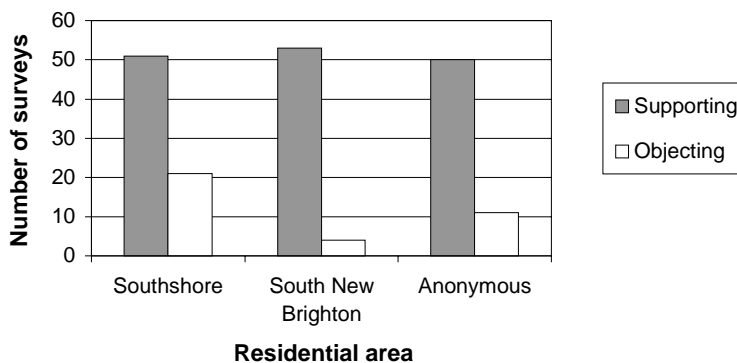


Figure 2: Response of survey participants to the proposed 5 metres wide firebreak.

Although 51 (66%) survey returns from Southshore residents suggest that 5 metres is acceptable to locals, the remaining 21 (27%) surveys provided many reasons for objecting to this width. Several residents express the opinion that a 5 metres break would be too narrow to prevent fire jumping and that the predominating wind off the sea would easily blow sparks further than 5 metres. Others comment on the aesthetics of the firebreak, concerned that it would be ugly and spoil the image of a 'beach living' lifestyle.

Those supporting the 5 metres guideline did not make much comment on the issue, but the general consensus seems to be that if the New Zealand Fire Service recommends a width of 5 metres then this is an acceptable distance. Other comments from both Southshore residents and those living further afield at South New Brighton, reflect a wish that any firebreak be landscaped to blend in to the surroundings. They also suggest that ground cover should be maintained (as opposed to a mown strip), and that only species native to the area should be used in plantings. If the spread of fire is to be avoided in the future, then general guidelines are needed for all householders rather than a handful of neighbours mowing their own 'firebreaks'.

PEDESTRIAN ACCESS

Presently public access through the Southshore dune area is limited to the five beach access tracks on the street ends off Rocking Horse Road. Any attempt to walk through the length of the area behind the dunes encounters a rugged, weed infested but visually interesting 'wilderness'. There are also at least ten private tracks to the beach, many mown. There are also a number of private structures, significant garden waste piles and large areas 'beautified' as extensions of private properties.

The lack of a track continuing south from Caspian Street to Tern Street effectively excludes most members of the public from the area and severely limits reserve management's ability to undertake effective weed control, native planting and monitoring of illegal activities in the area.

Members of the community were asked two main questions:

1. Whether they supported or objected to the extension of the track from Caspian Street to Tern Street, listing their concerns or the benefits that they felt might come from such an extension.
2. Whether they felt that 50 metres was a sufficient distance to allow for the privacy issues of neighbours.

It was proposed that over most of its length the track be placed along the dune hollows and be screened by plantings. In this way it would not be a dune 'top' track and would therefore be unobtrusive to neighbours. It would come no closer than 50 metres to the boundaries of private properties and in most cases could be nearly 75 metres away.

Results of this survey are illustrated by Figures 3 and 4.

Q3. Track extension

Southshore residents, whom the track appears to affect most directly in terms of proximity to properties, are almost equally divided on the issue, with 35 (45%) of the residents who responded to the survey opposing and 42 (55%) supporting the track extension (refer to Figure 3). A number of anonymous replies were also very aggressively opposed to the track extension and reflected a very strong depth of feeling on the matter.

Those objecting to the track extension did so mainly for reasons of security and privacy. They comment that walkers will have visual access straight into windows and areas that were previously private. There were several suggestions that the cost of purchasing beachfront properties some how reflected upon their security and privacy. Some suggested that the proposed plantings, to screen properties from the track, will only serve to provide a shield for criminal activities. Others felt that the fire hazard would be increased as greater access means greater risk. Several residents were also concerned of the effect of mountain bikes, trail bikes and wandering dogs on the fragile dune system and of the resultant disturbance to birds nesting in the dunes.

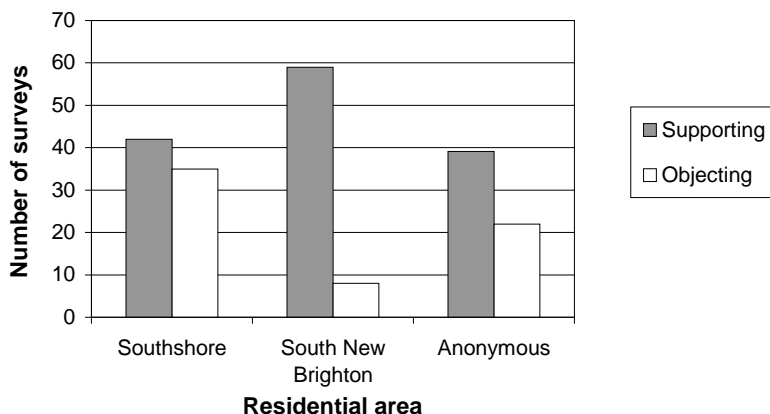


Figure 3:
Response of residents to the proposition of extending the Southern Pegasus Bay Track south of Caspian Street

Southshore supporters of the walkway comment that a track extension can only enhance the area in which they live, and that it will provide open access for everyone to enjoy the reserve, not just local residents. Some suggest that as most walkers have to walk down Rocking Horse Road or along the beach, through lack of an 'official' walking track, it is a sensible proposal meeting a variety of needs. They feel that privacy to their fellow neighbours is not the issue entirely, and comment that although consideration should be given to residents inheriting this situation, they may need to reassess their stance on the matter as the reserve is public land and should be enjoyed by all. However, some residents request that the track be for walkers/runners only and free of cyclists and dogs.

These comments are mirrored in the supportive responses from 59 (88%) of respondents from South New Brighton and 39 (60%) of those members of the community who chose to respond in an anonymous manner (see Figure 3). They remark that the extension would provide walkers with protection from easterly winds and a pleasant alternative to walking on the beach or road. It would also impart a sense of completion to the already existing Southern Pegasus Bay Track, encouraging more walkers to enjoy the walk right down to the Spit. They also strongly comment on the importance of the reserve being available to be enjoyed by all, allowing everyone the opportunity to experience and appreciate the beauty of the Spit and all that it has to offer in a controlled fashion.

Q4. Distance of track from private properties

The survey also posed the question of distance of the proposed track from private properties, and whether community members felt that 50 metres was a sufficient distance to allow for the privacy issues of neighbours. The results of this part of the survey are displayed in Figure 4.

Twenty-nine (38%) of the respondents from Southshore oppose this distance. They feel that 50 metres would not be sufficient, as some private properties backing onto the reserve are unfenced, and have tracks leading to the beach from their back doors. Issues of crime and privacy were therefore raised. Interestingly this is 6 (7%) replies less than the 35 (45%) who completely opposed the track extension. However, many of the 44 (57%) respondents supporting the proposed distance felt that it would be sufficient as long as a natural look was encouraged along the path and its surrounds.

Several residents comment that 50 metres is a very generous distance between the track and private boundaries, observing that many other Christchurch landowners have footpaths passing their doors at much less distance than this. Some also state that they are not concerned about issues of security and privacy, as most people using this sort of track would have an appreciation of the natural environment, and would walk the track to enjoy the coastal environment and fresh air, not to peer into other people's properties.

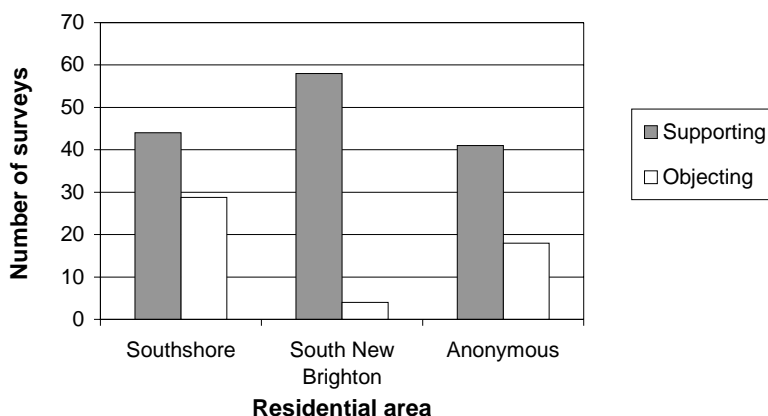


Figure 4:
Response of residents to a 50 metres distance between the track and private residences.

South New Brighton residents responded strongly to this issue, with 58 (86%) survey returns stating that 50 metres was more than adequate for privacy issues. Many also commented that the rest of the walkway runs in front of hundreds of homes along Marine Parade without problem. The issue of rubbish dumping by local residents in the dunes was also raised in a number of survey returns. Respondents feel that the dunes will be managed and maintained more efficiently if the track goes ahead, and that rubbish dumping by locals at the back of their properties will be monitored and forced to cease.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

The draft results of this survey were presented to representatives of the Southshore Ratepayers' Association (SSRA) on 10 May 2001. Our discussions revealed a general consensus regarding the development of a clear policy for firebreak management along the boundary with private properties. There was a desire for any policy to offer a variety of options for implementation to suit individual needs. There was also support for enforcing policy in regard to private occupation of public reserve land, especially where illegal dumping and storage of waste and materials was involved.

On the issue of pedestrian access through the reserve and the continuation of the Southern Pegasus Bay Track, a strong divergence of opinions is still very evident. The recent SSRA survey, undertaken prior to the Council survey, showed that 66 out of 88 Southshore respondents (75%) were opposed to any track extension. This is apparently at odds with the results of the Council survey, which showed a 42 to 35 split of Southshore respondents, marginally in favour of the track extension. To meet SSRA concerns about the accuracy of the analysis of results from this survey, it has been individually checked, recounted and verified by the Community Board Secretary, Adrian Carpinter.

The difference in results from the two surveys by Southshore respondents initially appears difficult to explain. It is surprising to the SSRA that the strong negative response to the track proposal in its survey is not repeated in both surveys. The fact that the SSRA survey included their questions on the track and fire break proposals as part of a much wider ranging multiple question survey, and that it provided no discussion, background or illumination of the issues surrounding the proposals is a difference. Respondents were expected to have read previous articles in the local newsletter to have an understanding of the issues involved. The Council survey however was able to provide accurate background and details on the questionnaire form, which may have illuminated the reality of the proposals and alleviated some concerns.

One of the main concerns expressed regarding the proposed track extension was the loss of privacy, increased vulnerability to crime and vandalism, and interference with a natural wilderness area. The reasons provided by those in opposition of a track extension are certainly understandable and the concerns of residents should not be ignored. A review of police crime statistics and their locations for the Southshore Area for the period from January 1999 to December 2000 could be said to show few correlations to existing access tracks from the beach. However, in some cases concerns expressed by individuals living next to the reserve raise matters that are partly their own responsibility. For example, residents at those properties without rear boundary fences while expressing security concerns may have to consider their own security responsibilities.

A number of submissions address the wilderness values of the area that would be threatened by any track development. It is true that the area does offer a perceived 'wilderness' experience in a dune-land setting. However, presently there are already a considerable number of private tracks through the reserve, many privately mown, which run from residential properties to the beach. Some of these private tracks also access illegal dumping sites in the dunes. These tracks are not mentioned by objectors when they are extolling the untouched wilderness values of the area as a reason to exclude the 'public'. There are few native or 'threatened' plants or animals regularly using the area in question that would be disturbed by increased pedestrian traffic.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Question	Support	%	Object	%	Answers	%
Q1: Firebreak Management	A-71	34%	B-128	61%	199	95%
Q2: 5 metres width of fire break	154	74%	36	17%	190	91%
Q3: Extend track	140	67%	65	31%	205	98%
Q4: 50 metres distance	143	68%	51	24%	194	92%

Figure 5:
Total response to Southshore Dune Management Survey questions

In terms of firebreak management issues, 61% of all survey returns give the opinion that the primary responsibility for fire management lies with the Council and should therefore be carried out by Council staff, with community input. A width of 5 metres is deemed acceptable by 74% of survey respondents.

Although respondents in the Southshore area are closely divided 55% to 45% in favour of the track extension, the resounding response from the general community is that it should go ahead. A total of 140 out of the 209 survey returns, or 67%, support the track extension south of Caspian Street. For those living outside of the Southshore the desire for access is even greater with 74% in favour of a continuation of the track to the south.

The community and Parks staff foresees many benefits of a track extension. Increased use will lead to an increased awareness and appreciation of the local environment as a wider section of the public are introduced to and have access to the beauty of Southshore. The track will be 'complete', and in its finished form will become known as an excellent recreation area, sheltered from winds, and linking the entire Christchurch coastline, and all its attributes, together. A formed access route will allow management access to carry out tasks such as planting, weed control and resource protection and monitoring.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the reserve is public recreation land, and all residents of Southshore, South New Brighton and the whole of Christchurch have a legitimate right to enjoy and access it. Recreational opportunities and environmental awareness can only be enhanced by the addition of a further stage of the Southern Pegasus Bay Track.

Recommendation: That the Board recommend the following policy additions and changes for the Christchurch Beaches and Coastal Parks Management Plan to the Parks and Recreation Committee:

1. Policy for Fire Risk Management on reserve land in the Southshore dunes - Caspian Street to Southshore Spit:
 - That private owners may if they wish, manage a strip, of no more than five metres wide, of reserve land adjacent to their property boundaries for fire protection,
 - That the Council will carry out fire safety management for hazard reduction as requested by individual property owners,
 - That any management by adjacent residents, within the five metre strip, be either mown grass or plantings of iceplant or evergreen native species,
 - That no earthworks occur within the five metre strip,
 - That the unauthorised building of structures and the dumping of waste by residents on reserve land be banned, and that existing structures and waste be removed.

2. Policy for Southern Pegasus Bay Track:
 - That the pedestrian track, known as the Southern Pegasus Bay Track, be reinstated and continue from Caspian Street to Tern Street,
 - That the Southern Pegasus Bay Track be no more than a mown strip of approximately one metre in width and where possible at least 50 metres from any property boundary,
 - That those private tracks crossing the dunes be rationalised, in consultation with users, and users encouraged to use managed crossings.

Chairperson's Recommendation: That the abovementioned recommendation be approved with the understanding that a firebreak strip be provided over the entire distance from Tern Street to Caspian Street either by private owners or by the Council.