

38. MISREPORTING BY THE PRESS NEWSPAPER ON WASTE ISSUES

The Chairman reports:

In the 'Weekend' section of The Press on Saturday 8 September, there was an article by Michelle Brooker and Colin Espiner entitled 'Pollutants and Politics'. This article purported to be a commentary on Christchurch waste and pollution issues, apparently intended as a guide for electors in advance of the imminent local government elections.

Unfortunately the article contains so much misinformation, and is so devoid of reliable facts, and is generally so badly written that its only possible effect is to completely mislead the public.

This situation is unacceptable. At the time of writing this report I have tried to contact the Editor of The Press with a view to encouraging the writing of another report which could correct the misinformation so far purveyed. So far I have been unable to make contact. I did have an input into the article which was printed, in that I was interviewed by both reporters. Unfortunately none of the information I gave was used. Instead comments I have made in the past, actually several weeks ago, and not in the context of the interview for this article, were used. It is a serious matter for the Council as a whole when the newspaper concerned is able to source very high quality information from the Council, Councillors, the RMF and other reliable sources, but fails to do so, while at the same time indicating a failure of our Council and the RMF to act on the issues in question.

On the other hand The Press has quoted liberally from people who have very little knowledge of the work on waste issues the Council and the RMF are involved in. These comments are inaccurate, and are going unchallenged. Members of the public may actually believe what is being printed.

The most disturbing thing for me personally is the emotive language being used against the Council, which betrays an attitude of hostility to the Council, and which I believe can accurately be described as unprofessional.

The following are some examples from the article which justify my complaints:

- * "Dumped a zero waste to landfill plan". In fact the previous Waste Plan did not have a zero waste goal. The Plan recently adopted inserts a zero waste goal for the first time.
- * Reference to the Estuary as "a sewage pond". The stupidity of the remark is self evident. The whole point of the \$65 million the Council is already in the process of spending is to ensure a very high quality environment for the Estuary. Even in its current state there is nothing about it which comes close to it justifying the description "sewage pond".
- * "Disposing of rubbish is also difficult and expensive and ... there are few signs of a broad consensus". The fact that the choice of a new regional landfill being the chosen disposal option after years of very wide public consultation throughout Canterbury, and unanimity amongst Canterbury Councils and within the Councils, has not been mentioned.
- * "Swimming in Sewage". This sub-heading repeats the most serious lie which The Press has repeated several times in its persistently poor reporting on this issue. Under no stretch of any reasonable definition of the word 'sewage' can it be properly applied to the treated waste-water discharge currently released into the ocean during the ebb-tide via the Estuary. Even more importantly, absolutely no mention at all is made of the current \$33 million plant upgrade and the positive effects it will have. Nor is any acknowledgement or even description given of the benefits the Council's decision to spend its available capital on better waste-water treatment rather than on the 'out-of-sight-out-of-mind' ocean pipeline.

The article totally misses the salient point, which is that once completed, the Council's chosen option will achieve the standard requested by the community during three years of public consultation, ie contact recreation standard, so that the waste-water will be cleaner than the water coming down the two rivers. The waste-water will also have about 50% less nutrient loading during the consent period.

- * "Ecan released a report which recommended the Council's application be declined because of a lack of evidence on the effects of the bacteria in treated effluent on fish and birds". No such thing is contained in the reports.
- * "The report also said the consent would not meet estuary water quality standards". The report says no such thing. Contact recreation standards are guaranteed.
- * Quote from Councillor Booth: "I've listened to the debate. If you are going to spend that much money logically it should go out to sea. We could also extend the pipe's capacity if Christchurch grows". Setting aside the question of how a pipe's capacity can be extended once built, no mention is made about the additional \$42 million to \$50 million the pipe would cost, and the whole question of cost-benefit. I am also amazed that the hour I spent on the telephone with the two reporters, has resulted in no comment from me in the article. Notwithstanding that I chair the City Services Committee, the RMF, the Canterbury Waste Committee, and Transwaste Canterbury, it appears that nothing I said was worth reporting. Instead Councillor Sherrif, who is not even a member of the City Services Committee, and Councillor Booth who voted for the Estuary option, and who has a limited track record on these issues, have earned space for their ideas – probably because they are seen as opposing the Council majority. This is obviously where The Press is coming from.
- * Concerning the proposed new regional landfill, which could be at Kate Valley: "locals say the dump will leave their land and investments ruined". Which locals are these? The Press has failed to identify anyone who has said this and who has got "land and investments" which could be affected. The Press has also failed to ascertain from Transwaste what consultation has so far been carried out and what issues there are. In fact there are many "locals" who have no serious concerns about the possible use of Kate Valley for a landfill at all. Many locals have declared their support.
- * "The district in which the proposed dump would be situated recycles 46 per cent of its waste stream compared to Christchurch's 19 per cent". This claim is complete twaddle. It is not even appreciated that Christchurch includes both hardfill and greenwaste (for composting) in its 'waste stream'. Hurunui does not. There are other huge differences between the two. Real facts are available from both the Council and the RMF. The Press has made use of neither.
- * Quote from Ian Spellerberg: that putting waste in the ground is "stupid practice" and "the Council is resiling from its previous good work". The Council has in fact resiled from no such thing, and is continually improving its waste reduction performance, and already has large budget provisions and processes in place to do a lot more. The Press's report mentions none of these. The Press's report is grossly unbalanced and its article of last Saturday falls far short of an acceptable standard of reporting or commentary on these issues.
- * "Existing landfills are almost overflowing and cost as much as \$100 per tonne. The super landfill could cut this to as little as \$50 per tonne". This is completely wrong in fact.
- * Under the sub-heading 'The Estuary': "The City Council had planned to build a 2km pipeline but last year it abandoned the plan". The City Council has never even considered a plan to build an ocean pipeline, let alone having ever having had such a plan.
- * Under the sub-heading 'The Landfill': "The City Council abandoned its target of zero waste to landfill by 2020". The Press fails to report that the Council inserted a zero waste to landfill goal for the first time, and has written into the Transwaste MOU a requirement to co-operate with the zero waste goal and to actively assist in finding viable alternatives. Also, the Transwaste MOU is limited to 20 years.
- * "More recycling and incineration have been proposed but rejected as too expensive and impractical". This again is nothing short of actual lying. It is perfectly clear that the Council has never rejected recycling at all for any reason, but in fact has supported recycling more and more every year, with very large budget increases. The Council and the RMF are involved currently in implementing a much expanded paper recycling collection and processing, the RMF set up the new Super Shed during the year, the Council has begun the process to upgrade the composting system with a new under cover plant able to accept putrescibles and biosolids from the waste stream. The Council has begun the drafting of a whole new set of bylaws to generate a large improvement in waste handling and disposal practices in the city, which will significantly advance recycling. The city's waste plan has adopted recycling and resource recovery, as well as waste minimisation measures (eg our 'Target Zero' plan) as the means, over time, to avoid landfilling. Incineration is simply not a solution. It is itself only another means of waste disposal and its avoidance by way of recycling and resource recovery and waste minimisation measures is included in the waste plan too.

Much more could be said about the failures of The Press, in its very sub-standard article. Suffice it to say that in my assessment, the standard of reporting in The Press on this occasion is nothing less than a disgrace. I propose that the Council does something about it. Given the anti-Council campaign now in progress by The Press, which is therefore unlikely to print a complaint about itself voluntarily, I believe that a complaint to The Press Council is both appropriate and richly deserved. We should also make the complaint available to those parts of the news media which are willing to use it in a balanced and professional way.

Chairman's

Recommendation:

1. That the Council investigate a complaint to The Press Council concerning the abovementioned article, and subject to sufficient fault being found, and the process required by The Press Council being fully observed, the Council authorise the lodging of such a complaint as soon as possible.
2. If the complaint proceeds, the full text of the complaint be made available to all news media at the same time as the complaint is lodged.