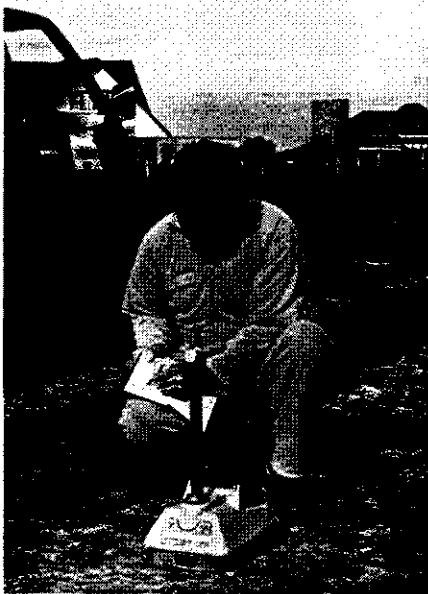


# ONE COUNCIL'S EXPERIENCE WITH SER

BY  
**PETER FRAWLEY**  
SENIOR PLANNER  
PALMERSTON NORTH CITY COUNCIL

*Palmerston North City Council wanted to produce a State of Environment Report!*



*Soil density testing.*

consent monitoring, is not entirely new to Palmerston North City Council. It is fortunate in having a relatively strong, in-house research and data collection resource. Palmerston North City Council has already undertaken on-going monitoring over a broad range of areas, including:

- (i) Monitoring of surface water quality in streams and rivers with particular emphasis on assessing the impacts of its own infrastructural works, for example, the Awapuni Landfill.
- (ii) Monitoring of social matters with particular emphasis on employment.
- (iii) Demographics.
- (iv) Quarterly economic trends on the city, covering matters such as building activity.

This resource provided a good information base for some of the environmental subjects to be monitored.

## HOW TO PRODUCE A SER

Before producing the SER, Palmerston North City Council needed to address two issues:

1. What subjects needed to be monitored and how – the methodology.
2. How does a SER relate to Palmerston North City Council's other monitoring programmes, existing and planned? One new factor to be considered was the proposed

monitoring of the strategic plan for Palmerston North city in achieving the city vision. The main objective in considering this inter-relationship was to avoid duplication.

Establishing the methodology, comprised the first stage of the project and this is described in Stephen Knight's article in *Planning Quarterly* No 117 (March 1995). This involved close liaison between staff and the consultants producing the report, plus consultation with tangata whenua and other groups or organisations, including the Manawatu Regional Council. It is fair to say, Palmerston North City Council benefited from the in-house, multi-disciplined skills the consultant was able to bring to the project, particularly at the stage of setting up a methodology.

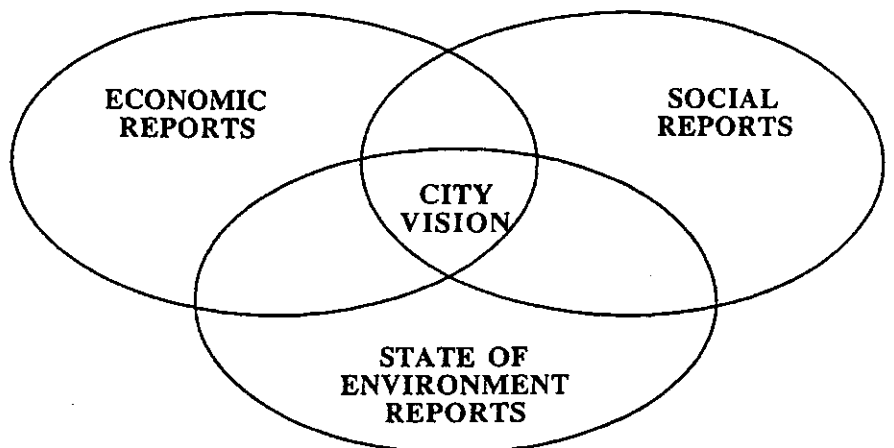
The inter-relationship between a SER and the other council monitoring programmes, can in simple terms be illustrated as shown in the diagram

It could be argued that a SER could cover all these areas. A global-type report would, however, only duplicate other monitoring work. It was more helpful to approach the preparation of a SER in the context of what it could add to the monitoring already undertaken, and to incorporate summary findings of those other monitoring results as appropriate, eg, monitoring results of surface water quality.

Monitoring of the natural environment is generally seen to be a function of SER reporting. More difficult to decide was how to avoid duplication between the social environment

## WHY PRODUCE A STATE OF ENVIRONMENT REPORT?

Why produce a 195-page document titled "State of Environment Report" for Palmerston North city? A simple answer could be, "we had to ... after all, section 35 of the *Resource Management Act 1991* (RMA) requires each local authority to monitor the state of the environment. But hang on a minute, you may think Palmerston North city isn't a regional council, it shouldn't have to do a full-blown work on the state of the natural environment of Palmerston North city. Couldn't they get away with more traditional forms of monitoring, such as land use and subdivision consent monitoring? Not really, not if a territorial authority interprets section 35 to its full and proper meaning. It also helps, that Palmerston North City Council wanted to produce a State of Environment Report (SER) and start the process of state of environment reporting. Wanting to do something, makes the having to do requirement, less of a burden. "Monitoring", other than





Testing at Awapuni landfill.



Bore testing at Awapuni.

component of the SER and the Social Report. To avoid this duplication, it was decided at this stage to include only essential social subjects which directly impacted on the environment in the SER. For example, growth in the stock of residential housing. A subject such as crime statistics, on the other hand, would be monitored as part of the city vision monitoring, where more targeted techniques of survey analysis could be used, for example, public opinion surveys as a technique to gauge community attitudes to safety.

### SOME OF THE PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED WITH THE FIRST SER

Even though council staff and consultants had worked carefully on the methodology before beginning information collection, analysis and production of the SER, there was uncertainty as to what the final report would look like.

The following factors contributed to this:

1. It was the first SER produced for Palmerston North city, so there were no previous documents to compare it with.
2. Time – the actual information collection, analysis and production of the SER was carried out in a relatively short time-span of some six months.

3. Full cost and availability of data in some areas was not able to be fully assessed at the formative stages of the project.
4. A lack of guidelines and appropriate indicators nationally, meant there was some uncertainty in the feasibility of monitoring certain subjects, such as sustainability of agricultural land use.
5. Uncertainty as to the detail and availability of data held by external agencies.

After investigating certain subjects, particularly those pertaining to the social environment, previous assumptions had to be revisited. In the end, it all goes to show that despite the best intentions to devise a full-proof methodology before beginning a SER proper, local authority really need to complete a SER in the first instance, to flesh out problem areas and work to correct these in subsequent SER's.

### WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

The SER brought together diverse environmental indicators from the natural, physical and social environments, into something of an integrated framework for the Palmerston North City Council. Put simply, it provided a systematic overview of Palmerston North city's environment. Key findings of the SER are covered in Conway

Stewart's article. A number of recommendations also arose from the report and some of these will require more resources to be put into effect. As a consequence, Palmerston North City Council is to undertake a "levels of service" review in respect of these recommendations and its responsibilities generally, under section 35 of the RMA.

The first SER essentially provides the basis for internal comparison with future SER's. It is anticipated subsequent SER's will be prepared at two-yearly intervals. Given that Palmerston North, to our knowledge, is one of the few territorial authorities to produce a SER, to date, there is little external comparison to be made with other studies at a regional or national level. For this reason, there will be keen interest in imminent government initiatives on environmental reporting.

New monitoring tasks initiated by this SER process, eg, extended monitoring of surface water areas, will now be continued for the next SER, in addition to the monitoring programmes already established. Having started the process, Palmerston North City Council will in future have the benefit of a steady build-up of data over a long period. The reporting process can only get better. ■