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PERIPHERAL URBAN GROWTH

EMPLOYING A
COMBINATION OF
STRATEGIES IS AN
EFFECTIVE WAY OF COPING
WITH URBAN GROWTH IN
MAJOR URBAN CENTRES.

This article is a perspective on peripheral urban growth, based on experience with the issue in Christchurch over the last few years. I am not in a position to comment on particular rezoning proposals, currently subject to hearings before the Christchurch City Council and the City Plan hearings. The views expressed in this article are mine and are not necessarily those of the council.

Urban growth is a significant issue, particularly in Auckland and Christchurch. The main theme of this article is that attitudes to urban growth are still dominated by the way we approached the issue under the *Town and Country Planning Act*, notwithstanding the fact that the Resource Management Act has been in operation for over five years. While there may be justification for regulatory intervention to control peripheral urban growth, including on a "locational" basis, this must be related to managing adverse effects within the framework of sustainable management. It should not be based on what could be described as a "social engineering" approach to resource management, based on past ways of doing things. Nor should peripheral urban growth be seen as a threat to be stamped out at all costs.

VERSATILE SOILS

Versatile soils are seen as a major factor in terms of urban growth, particularly in the Christchurch area. Recently, two Environment Court decisions, one being *Canterbury Regional Council v Selwyn District Council and Tucker*, and the other being *Becmead and Others v Christchurch City Council*, have given some clear indication for the first time since the Act was passed (other than resource consents under transitional plans), on the court's position in respect of the protection of versatile soils.

Attention is often drawn to the proportion of New Zealand's area consisting of versatile soils, normally defined as Class 1 and 2 under the LUC system devised in the early 1970s. While such soils make up only 5% of the country's land area, it is also true to say that the vast majority of them

are utilised in a manner far below their potential. In the Canterbury Region for example, approximately 5% of the 290,000ha of versatile soils are actually used for intensive farming. The majority of these soils are used for pastoral farming which can be carried out on poorer quality land. Consequently, there is immense scope to utilise versatile soils to a much greater degree than is currently the case.

The stock of versatile soils within the boundaries of Christchurch City comprises less than 3% of this regional total of 290,000ha. Even if every square metre of versatile soils within Christchurch were utilised for urban purposes, this would make only a very minor difference to potential productivity within the region as a whole, and even less nationally. It would enable another 200,000 people to be housed at current (low) densities. Housing 200,000 people on this land may better achieve the purposes of the Act than "allocating" them for agricultural production. However, the likelihood of all the city's versatile soils actually being used for urbanisation is remote, because in many cases they are also protected by other factors. Some are on land in close proximity to the airport; some are on flood plains; and some are on land unable to be economically serviced.

I consider that the council's maximum role in terms of regulatory intervention is to maintain the productive potential of such soils that are likely to remain rural, as it is no longer in the business of ensuring applicants achieve certain levels of production. For nearly 20 years, the council and its predecessors have been administering rural productivity criteria, requiring applicants for rural dwellings to establish farm management regimes and effectively maintain certain levels of production. Some have done so successfully, while others have been spectacular failures.

It has been claimed that the protection of versatile soils (and virtually every hectare of them) is justified in order to meet a potential world food crisis. This begs the question of whether the problem is one of lack of availability of productive land, or one of price and

distribution. The products of high quality soils include luxury items sold at high prices in overseas niche markets. Indeed, they have to be for intensive farming uses to be economic, and for the growers to achieve a satisfactory rate of return. Market gardening areas such as Marshlands have been intensively subdivided for many years and the industry has generally relocated to larger blocks well outside the city.

The domestic requirements of Christchurch for market garden produce can be satisfied with ease on a very small proportion of the region's versatile soils. Is it realistic for example, to expect that basic food staples, required by people in the third world, could be produced on versatile soils around Christchurch, and exported at a price that could possibly achieve an acceptable return to the growers concerned? This seems highly unlikely, even if one is contemplating rural production being firmly guided by right thinking land use planners and elected representatives from council offices.

It is interesting that peripheral urban growth is seen as the primary threat, if not the only one, to the integrity of the versatile soil resource. However, I am firmly of the view that a far greater threat is posed by intensive rural subdivision. For example, two-hectare lifestyle blocks on versatile soils can create far greater "wastage" of land than urbanisation could ever do. Twenty rural residential dwellings on two-hectare allotments, use 40ha of land, whereas the same area of land subdivided to average suburban densities will accommodate at least 400 households. Small rural allotments are too small to achieve flexibility of long term production, while being larger than necessary to achieve high amenity values.

Is there a case for protecting versatile soils at all? I believe an arguable case can be made for doing so, but only as one of a range of factors. The council argument in the Becmead case, which was accepted by the court, is that versatile soils do not have primacy over other resource management matters such as the protection of important landscapes, or avoiding the adverse effects of inappropriate infill development. Under section 5 of the Act, it can be argued that the protection of versatile soils for their human life-supporting capacity, is one of the matters that can be taken into account under the Act, but weighed in the balance with other resource management issues. This is not a matter of balancing the benefits of development against its disadvantages; rather it is a case of comparing the

benefits of regulatory intervention to protect soils, against the costs and consequences of doing so. This may include the costs of irrigating or fertilising poorer soils, balanced against increased transport costs and fossil fuel usage caused by protection of soils and a more dispersed pattern of urban growth.

In the Tucker decision, the court indicated that it was within the power of regional councils (and arguably therefore district councils) to protect larger tracts of land where the justification for such protection can be demonstrated. In my view, a case can be advanced for the protection of versatile soils in situations where these comprise large tracts of land with defensible boundaries, and where full account has already been taken of the consequences of avoiding urbanisation of that land. What is "large" may depend on the regional scarcity of that resource; 10ha may not be significant in the Canterbury context, or even 500ha over a 20-year period.

In the Christchurch area, there was in my opinion an undue preoccupation with the protection of versatile soils at the exclusion of other soil types and other resource management values, for many years. As one illustration of this, the council recently purchased (at great expense) one of the few remaining wetland areas in Christchurch known as Travis Swamp, which had long been zoned as suitable for urban development because its soils were not versatile. Under section 6 of the Act, where land and soils support areas of important ecological value, then they may well justify stronger protection under the Act than versatile soils. Similarly, the Port Hills, generally, were seen as an area suited to urban development, but this has now changed with landscape values assuming much more significance. It should be not lost on us that these are fundamental changes in mindset from the *Town and Country Planning Act*.

The effect of the greenbelt around Christchurch was to distort the land market in the rural area in a manner unforeseen by its authors. An observant visitor leaving the city by road could predict with some certainty when he/she had reached the edge of the greenbelt. They would know this because of the incongruous appearance of rural residential and pseudo urban development at the point where the greenbelt ended, and where regulatory control became noticeably weaker. All of these areas are located well out of the city, are often poorly serviced and are totally reliant on the private car. In addition,

an effect of the greenbelt (intentional or otherwise) was to encourage subdivision of large blocks into more small lots beyond the greenbelt where the long term potential for sustaining production would otherwise have been greater. Versatile soils in outlying areas are usually less complicated by high densities of rural settlement which limits economies of scale.

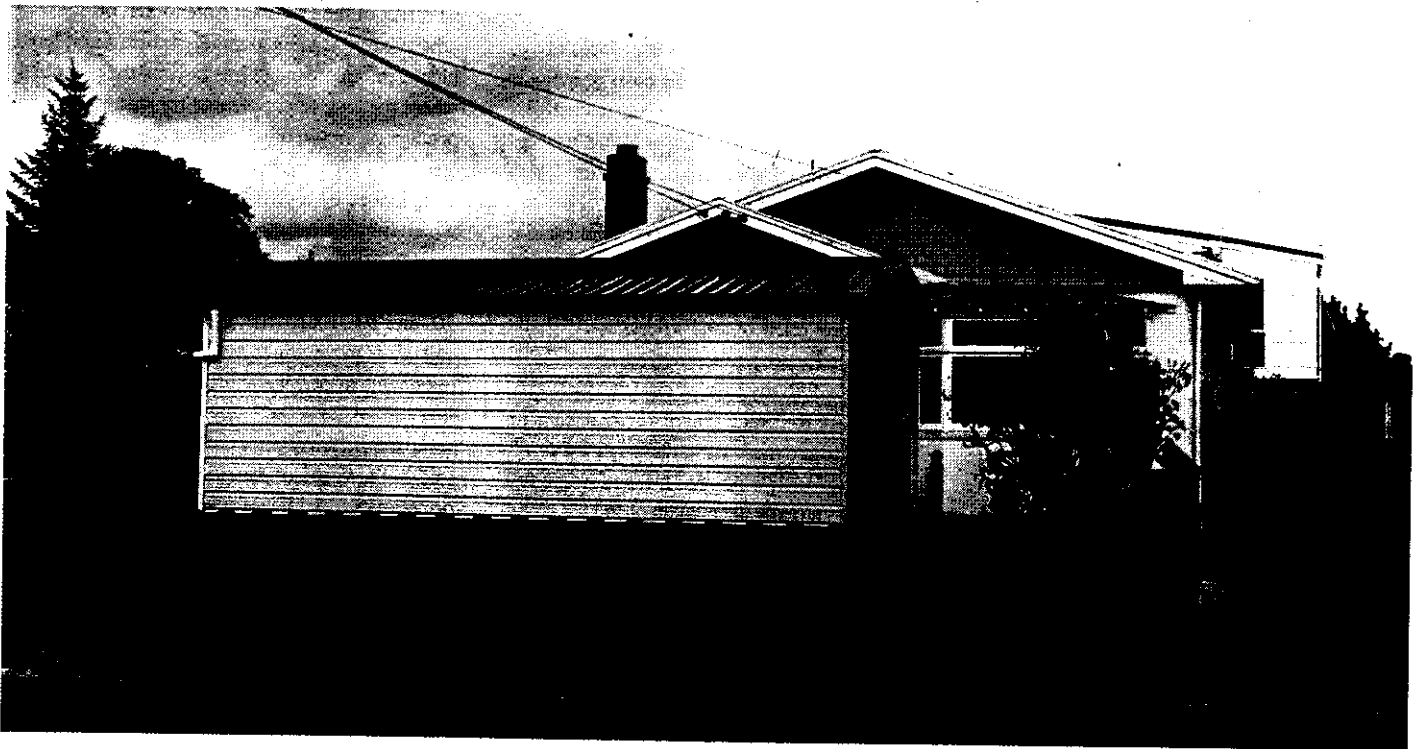
Public attitudes, perhaps ironically fostered by strong advocacy for directive planning in the 70s and 80s, is apparent in the debate on versatile soils. It is intriguing to note that many of the opponents of peripheral urban development live in suburban detached houses, built on versatile soils around the edge of the city. Much has been said of the vision of the city's forefathers in providing for public open spaces and parks; and indeed even the concept of greenbelts. The fact is, the city's forefathers made no attempt whatsoever to restrain the outward expansion of the city over high quality soils. The concept of a regulatory greenbelt only arrived relatively late on the scene in the 1960s; and even then, its apparent success was largely attributable to low population growth in the period from the early 1970s until the early 1990s. This in many respects may well have saved planners from acute embarrassment, particularly if the growth rates of mid-90s had occurred earlier.

It is also apparent that urban dwellers see private rural land around the city as a de facto "public park", the use of which can be simply controlled on demand by the council.

PANACEAS — SATELLITE TOWNS

The concept of satellite towns, an imported European idea, is one that has long held an attraction in the Christchurch area since the days of the third Labour Government and the proposal to establish a satellite city at Rolleston in the 1970s.

Under the *Town and Country Planning Act*, it was possible for regulatory authorities, in this case the then United Council, to simply impose a directive greenbelt strategy, without having to consider the costs of that strategy, or the financial implications of making it work. The Regional Planning Scheme established a greenbelt with growth directed to outlying towns such as Rangiora, Kaiapoi and Rolleston. As late as 1990, there was no zoned provision for expansion of Rolleston, and a complete absence of any indication of how the township would develop in terms of its surrounding environment.



Such minor matters as effluent disposal were almost left to divine providence! It seemed to be expected that the urban growth problems of Christchurch would be paid for by Selwyn District township dwellers and sheep farmers, through hefty rate rises. It was this type of regulatory approach, with inadequate consideration for practical implementation or financial implications, which was I believe, a major reason why section 32 found its way into the *Resource Management Act*.

There seems to be an article of faith that satellite towns will work if we believe that they will. Best of all, it means development happens somewhere else. It seems curious to say that development should not happen on the urban periphery because of the presence of versatile soils, and because of car dependence; development in outlying centres involves greater travel distances and car dependency, and does not appear to promote sustainable use of fossil fuels. It may also threaten versatile soils.

Satellite towns, by their very existence, create demand for commuter travel. For example, the town of Kaiapoi to the north of Christchurch, which at least has a local historic identity, effectively acts as a satellite town with 65% of its working population having jobs within Christchurch. Unless there is some way of compelling people who live in a particular place to

also work there, it is unlikely that even providing a "balance" between employment and population, (assuming such a socially prescriptive strategy is possible under the RMA) would even work.

Some would suggest that rail transport between outlying satellite towns and the city would be a means of overcoming transport problems. In the Christchurch context, no work has ever been done on the financial or operational realities of such an option; it just sounds like a good idea. Such an option can at best be a partial solution, and only when the size of satellite towns reaches a very large critical mass needed to make it work. Under section 9 and section 32 of the Act, it seems to me that the implications of promoting rigid urban containment and satellite towns has to be justified first; rather than why we are not regulating, and leaving it to others to work out details like transport later.

In the Christchurch context, promoting satellite town development 15-20km outside the city is similar (in hindsight) to Auckland promoting large scale urbanisation of Howick, Albany and Manurewa. This scenario, one would imagine, would raise some eyebrows in Auckland. To a large extent, satellite towns are merely urban sprawl relocated to another place. If urban sprawl is deemed to be a bad thing, then satellite towns are certainly not a good way of addressing the problem.

Infill development which creates the appearance of a shanty town.

Having said that, the growth of towns outside the city, subject to the same tests under the RMA as the growth of the city itself, may well be sustainable if it results from personal choice, not direction, and such centres have their own local identity. Satellite towns promoted as outlying dormitory suburbs have all the disadvantages of peripheral suburbia, and more.

One must also ask what the effect of regulatory intervention is on urban growth, if it ultimately directs population to other larger centres in New Zealand. If controlling urban growth in Christchurch diverts people and jobs to Auckland instead, one would have to seriously ask whether this is a desirable environmental outcome, and one which would result in a more sustainable pattern of development nationally.

PANACEAS — MEDIUM AND HIGH DENSITY INFILL DEVELOPMENT

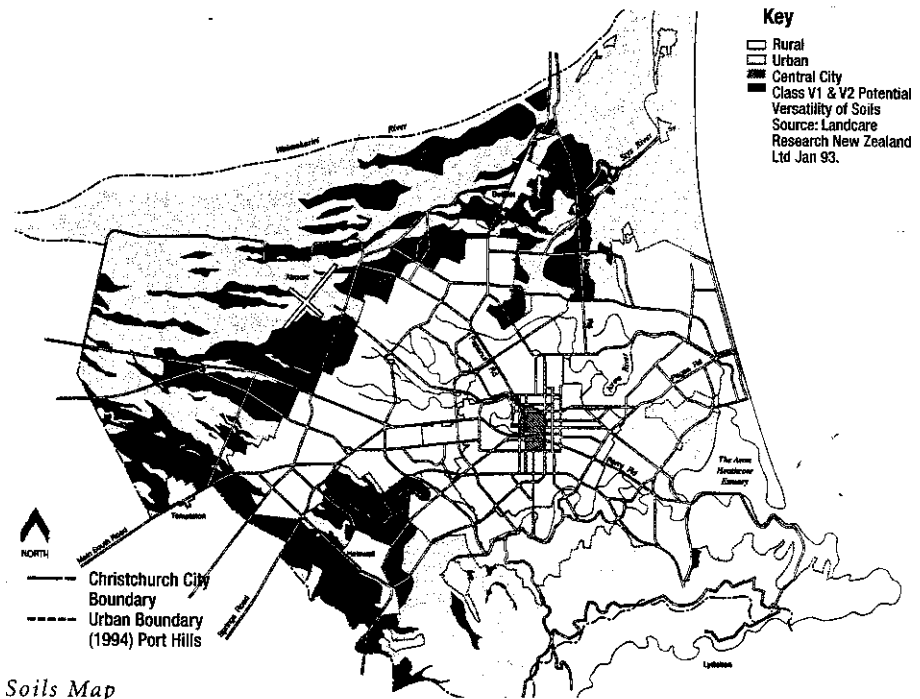
It is often suggested that one way of accommodating urban growth is to promote

infill housing, often based on the perception of people who have visited European cities. The scarcity of peripheral urban land has certainly encouraged a thriving infill housing market in Christchurch, which has provided up to 60% of the land for new units in recent years. It has also generated widespread hostility, with two forms of infill being deemed particularly offensive by existing residents. The first is the "garage on the front lawn and the unit behind the house" type of infill, and the second is high density town house development.

This is not to say that infill development is necessarily bad, and indeed much of it is desirable, but some forms of infill development have resulted in a substantial decline in the quality of urban amenity values – at least arguably an adverse effect relevant under section 5(2)(c) of the Act. One example is a local street where there are seven houses in a row, each with a metal garage on the front lawn and a new unit behind the older house. Whatever else one may think of infill development, this creates a true shanty town appearance, which does little for our "garden city" character. When the original dwelling reaches its use-by date, the physical scope for further redevelopment of these sites will be limited.

It is also important to realise that this is not simply an issue of good or bad design. Given that people are generally seeking units with larger floor spaces, and often own two or more vehicles, the amount of the site taken up by buildings, vehicle access, and manoeuvring has tended to become larger over the years as section sizes have become smaller. This has made the option of private gardens and plantings less and less practicable on smaller sections. Cities dominated by asphalt and buildings are not necessarily the type of environment that New Zealanders may necessarily wish to associate with, still less have imposed on them by wise greenbelt planners.

Another frequent manifestation of this panacea is to seize upon some hapless, older, low income suburb, and pronounce it "ripe for redevelopment". Quite apart from the practical problems created by multiple ownership of properties, it is unlikely that simply because a council deems an area to be "ripe for redevelopment" that the market will see it in similar light. In many cases the likelihood of these areas being comprehensively redeveloped without compulsory acquisition and purchase and major council (ratepayer) expenditure, is remote.



Soils Map

In inner city areas of the city some residents are already alarmed at social dislocation of incremental private development. Heavy-handed comprehensive urban renewal is likely to be far more disruptive. Large-scale public housing projects often have a poor image. Encouraging a new Amsterdam, Cologne or Stuttgart may be desirable; regulating for it is another matter.

This must also bring us to question some of the paradigms that have developed over many years about the status of the central city. This has led to a common belief that maintaining the relative commercial dominance of the central city must be maintained at all costs, because this is seen to be good for the city as a whole.

One can readily agree that avoiding the decay of inner cities (similar to that in some North American cities) is something that should be avoided. However, the best strategy may only be to ensure that the central city does not go into a position of absolute decline, and that development in suburban centres may well be complementary to promoting the central city as the primary commercial and cultural focus. A strong central city focus tends to promote radial commuter movements. Having created this problem, we then seek to impose solutions to solve it, leading to a mentality that the "transport problem" is one of moving people from the suburbs to the city centre, not one of movement of people in the urban area as a whole. One

school of thought says that it is desirable to promote growth in the central city by encouraging easy car access. This then raises the problem of finding land for parking; the detraction associated with circulation and parking; and the generally disastrous effects on land uses adjoining the radial road network.

An alternative school of thought also suggests that the best option is to promote growth of the central city but by encouraging high density development adjacent to radial transport routes on the belief that people will see the logic of not owning cars and relying on public transport. But do we know that these residents will in fact work in the central city as our hopeful predictions would suggest, or that their car ownership levels will be lower? Perhaps a more sustainable strategy is to ensure that the central city "holds its own" by encouraging it as the cultural and entertainment focus of the city, and also to act as the main service centre for growing number of residents who choose to live close to the central city. Provided this is achieved, commercial development in larger suburban centres may not be a bad thing, particularly if they are well distributed and travel distances are likely to be smaller as a result. Similarly, it may be more realistic to ensure that the evolving pattern of urban growth is able to be serviced by public transport should the cost of private transport or other factors restrict future car usage, rather than

futile attempts to enforce public transport usage other than by offering a better service.

SOCIAL ENGINEERING

It would seem that section 5 of the Act is essentially about people making their own choices about how to meet their social and economic needs, consistent with the limitations in subsections (2)(a), (b) and (c). In other words, restrictions on particular forms of development, including urban growth, have to be justified on the basis that they are a necessary consequence of avoiding, remedying or mitigating adverse effects.

From this, I don't believe it is the resource manager's role to impose controls based on a view of the way the world should be because there are some in the community who see suburban housing as at the epitome of all that is wrong with society.

One frequently heard claim is that this type of housing only caters for the rich. This is despite the fact that most housing in the city, including the older suburbs, comprises detached housing which make up much of the more affordable housing stock within the city. This in turn raises the question as to the extent to which planning policies have increased the cost of housing. Intervention may well achieve higher standards of amenity and may be justified (whether it be on infill or peripheral housing); but it is likely to have an effect on the cost of housing.

For some years now it has been common for councils to marginalise the effects that restricting the supply of land has on land prices. The issue is a complex one, and the supply of land is but one factor in this equation. However, it would seem to deny a fundamental principle of economics to try and suggest that restricting the supply of urban land has little or no effect on the cost of land and housing. In the case of Christchurch, for many years growth was so slow and the policies imposed by councils generally had only limited effect, because the supply of land was adequate to ensure that the small amount taken up each year had relatively little impact on the available stock. In recent times however, as the rate of land development has increased as a result of increased population and household growth, the effects of traditional policies would seem to be that some impact on land prices has occurred. The rate of inflation in land prices

has far exceeded the general increase in the rise in the consumer price index as a whole in recent years. In Christchurch, the fact that section prices are high in relative terms seems to offer at least prima facie evidence that policies severely restricting land supply are having an effect. This must be a section 32 consideration, as restrictions which impose costs on people's ability to house themselves, is a matter that the council is required to consider.

Some would argue that the form of housing that many New Zealanders have chosen is now politically or otherwise unacceptable, and that we should be modelling ourselves on the type of housing that medium density advocates admire in European cities. Promoting infill housing in these circumstances is seen as a desirable thing, particularly in someone else's suburb. Indeed, some attitudes reflect a fundamental hostility to urbanisation itself, best reflected in debates on amenity, where it is quite common to hear it argued that rural is beautiful and urban is ugly.

Little thought seems to be given to whether cities are in fact the most efficient means of using energy and resources. A pattern of development based on large non-urban rural holdings, satellite towns, and higher density cities may not necessarily offer the most sustainable form of development at all.

Others argue for "population caps" on particular urban areas, arguably the most extreme example of social engineering. I don't believe it is within the ambit of councils to undertake population planning and that the level of population growth (particularly immigration) is a matter for central government to determine.

Countries are quite entitled to manage immigration, one factor is urban growth, as part of the political process. Councils for their part have to adapt to the consequences of urban growth, which may well result in a population level in excess of the current population of a particular urban area, but one which may still be sustainable.

Dire warnings of the fate of Los Angeles ignore the fact that it has 20-times the population of Christchurch. The consequences of peripheral urban growth around Christchurch may well result in it eventually becoming unsustainable at a particular population threshold – perhaps 500,000 people, perhaps more or less than this. Further

peripheral growth is not necessarily unsustainable at this point in time.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Concern about peripheral urban growth is not necessarily a lost cause, and there may well be justification for intervention. However, the argument has to be re-cast in a manner which is more readily defensible under the *Resource Management Act*, rather than fighting today's battles with yesterday's arguments. There is a need to adopt a holistic approach to all the elements of natural and physical resources and the environment, including landscape values, ecological values, the adverse impact of some forms of infill development, transport and servicing, changing technology, and weigh these in the balance along with traditional concerns such as protection of versatile soils.

We also need to become much more aware of the true costs of extending urban areas and ensuring that these costs are met by the developers that promote it. This is not to say that the allocation of such costs is easy to identify, and in some areas there are no markets in existence at all, for example, land of high conservation value. This supports a case for judicious regulatory intervention.

Although predetermined direction and control of development is certainly not a part of the Act, the location of development could be subject to control as a consequence of avoiding and mitigating the adverse effects of development. On areas of high landscape value, on flood plains, or on land which combines these factors with the presence of versatile soils, there may well be limitations on the location of urban growth. No one strategy – infill, peripheral development or satellite towns – will in itself solve the problem.

A combination of strategies is likely in my view to prove more successful. Strategies of service delivery outside plans and the Act will also need to assume greater significance.

Councils have to come to terms with the reality that selecting growth options on the basis of social and economic outcomes and grand visions of what's best for people, are past, certainly using the Resource Management Act and District Plans as a vehicle. Such an approach to resource management is unlikely to succeed, let alone win acceptance and survive section 32 challenges.

