

BY PETER RAEBURN SERVICE MANAGER, RESOURCE MANAGEMENT  
AND PHILIP BROWN PRINCIPAL PLANNER, WAITAKERE CITY COUNCIL

# MEDIUM DENSITY HOUSING OUT WEST

URBAN GROWTH  
MANAGEMENT IN  
WAITAKERE CITY

Entering the 1990s, Waitakere was the typical low density urban edge city. The two main town centres – New Lynn and Henderson – were ringed by industrial zones, partly developed with long-established businesses, but with substantial tracts of undeveloped land. Beyond that were the older residential areas in the city – originally the quarter acre standard, but, in many areas, “cross-leased”. Further out still, into the Glen Eden, Massey and West Harbour areas, there was more recent residential development at the 1970s/80s standard site size of 700m-800m<sup>2</sup>. And at the outer edge, there was rampant low density suburban growth moving further and further away from employment and community centres, and public transport infrastructure. Waitakere was the country’s fastest growing city – an extra “city” (20,000 people) was being created every seven years. Over 50% of the resident employed population worked outside the city, and traffic was clogging the motorways.

In 1992 the Council cried “enough”! Waitakere was declared an “eco-city”, and was the first city in the country to adopt a local Agenda 21 plan (the “Greenprint”).

A fundamental platform of the Council’s new direction was consolidating urban growth. Council’s strategic plan (“Strategic Directions” – adopted in 1994) promoted concepts now fashionable, but then almost revolutionary. These included recognising that the city had a legacy of great potential in its under utilised rail system; promotion of higher density and mixed use development (sometimes described as “new urbanism”), particularly around town centres and passenger transport nodes; actively encouraging the development of town centres – including incorporation of residential development to inject after-hours life to these areas; and recognising the immense natural qualities of the city – the Waitakere Ranges, the bush, the streams and the coast – and enhancing those qualities.

Words are fine, but it is action that counts. It was to be a major task to turn around a city which, even in 1994, contained very few of the features the Council was seeking to establish.

One example was that the city contained no model of the medium density housing form considered important to sustainable urban growth and satisfaction of market demands.

## NEW LYNN CHARRETTE

In late March 1996, Council facilitated an intensive consultation and group design process, known as the “New Lynn charrette”. The charrette aimed to establish a sustainable city form for the New Lynn town centre and advance the regional debate on transportation and urban land use.

Over 700 residents attended the charrette, which took place over five consecutive days. Waitakere City was assisted and supported in the design process by Auckland City Council, the Auckland Regional Council, and Tranz Metro. The extensive consultation and “enquiry by design” exercise involved planners, urban designers, traffic engineers, and ecologists working alongside residents, businesses, landowners, government agencies and interest groups. An important product of the charrette was a series of comprehensive drawings that detailed a structure for the New Lynn centre and surrounding neighbourhoods (the “New New Lynn” concept plan). Several international urban design and transportation experts were engaged to guide and facilitate the process, including Chip Kaufman and Wendy Morris from Australia, and Paul Murrain and Bill Lieberman from the United States.

The charrette identified many opportunities for providing medium density housing within the walkable catchment of the town centre. It was agreed residential accommodation close to town centre locations would provide housing choice, in terms of type and affordability, for a range of people. The ability to walk to shops, workplace, recreational facilities and public transport terminals had great potential to reduce the need for car use, and move toward the city objective of creating a more sustainable urban fabric.

## DISTRICT PLAN

Good ideas can be frustrated by unnecessary regulation. As a parallel process to Council’s



Above: Ambrico Place – medium density housing.

Below: Pioneers – Gary Grant and John Eden.

development of a city growth strategy, Waitakere's new RMA District Plan was being developed. The Council was successful, through processes of good research, analysis and – most importantly – extensive consultation, in achieving a regulatory platform with strong and transparent links to the city's strategic direction. Some features of the District Plan include:

- Subject to recognition of reverse sensitivity effects, provision for residential development in all of the city's commercial and industrial areas (previously little or no residential development allowed).
- Provision for medium density housing<sup>1</sup> within given radii around all of the city's town centres and public transport nodes (no equivalent in the previous district plan).
- All medium density housing provided for utilising non-notified application processes (important incentive for development).
- A comprehensive set of medium density housing criteria (which concentrate on good urban design principles).
- A set of subdivision standards encouraging flexibility – including no minimum site sizes, provision for narrow streets, encouragement of street connectivity, etc.
- Recognising the character of some of the older parts of the city through encouraging comprehensive medium density residential development, rather than "cross-lease" development.

While the District Plan is not yet operative, all of the above provisions are effectively in place and are important to the success of the city's urban growth strategy.

## IT'S HAPPENED!

Among those who attended the New Lynn Charrette were John Ede and Gary Grant. John and Gary were much encouraged by charrette outcomes and wanted to further discuss the possibility of establishing a terraced housing development in Ambrico Place. Ambrico Place was an industrial street, very close to the New Lynn town centre and adjoining the railway. The street had been subdivided some years ago, but only one or two sites had been developed for industrial purposes. Residential development was only provided for in the area subsequent to the Proposed District Plan coming out in late 1995.

John and Gary later formed Ambrico Apartments Limited, a company which then embarked on a terrace housing development project – "Tuscany Towers" – a development now nearing completion with over 100 residential units.

This particular development was the first of its type in the entire Waitakere City area, and was a turning point which established a physical statement and model of an important component of the Council's strategic direction.

## TAKE OFF

Three years on, and resource consents have been granted for eight separate developments in Ambrico Place alone, comprising in total around 300 medium density housing units. Approximately 225 of these houses are constructed and occupied. Similar developments are being established throughout the city – no less than 1,000 medium density units now built, being built or in advanced planning processes. The speed of this development has surprised even the most optimistic supporter of urban change within Waitakere, and demonstrates a significant latent demand for a wider range of housing types within the community. Certainly, there was almost universal scepticism from the real estate agents and developers who attended the New Lynn Charrette when asked to speculate about the marketability of medium density housing around the sub-regional town centres of Waitakere City. "It'll never work out west" is now just a distant echo.

## WHAT WORKS

Since initial developer contact in 1996 Waitakere Council staff have learnt a lot, and are still learning, about the most effective ways of putting urban growth strategies on the ground. The following elements are critical to success:

- A well-defined urban growth strategy. The strategy developed at Waitakere in the early 1990s has been the basis for all subsequent initiatives. Importantly, that strategy is consistent with the Auckland Regional Policy Statement and the Auckland Region Growth Strategy – both finalised in 1999.
- Concept planning. The New Lynn Charrette process, and many other such projects subsequently carried out in Waitakere, have indicated the importance of putting the time and effort in to identifying opportunities which will eventually lead to achievement of the overall strategy. Community consultation in these processes is essential.
- Partnerships. The Council must be a welcoming environment for those interested in developing. As far as possible, emphasis needs to be placed on non-regulatory mechanisms. Waitakere's "Developers' Design Guide",<sup>2</sup> which is a non-regulatory document, is a much more effective tool than the



District Plan in achieving good development.

- Good advice. Staff must be trained, or advisers must be on hand, to work with developers to achieve a result which is good for them, and good for the wider community as well. Waitakere adopts a "team meeting" approach to development proposals – arranging for all expert advisers from within and outside the Council to meet with developers on as many occasions as necessary to inject the best ideas and achieve a consistent, timely outcome.

## THE FUTURE

The Regional Growth Strategy seeks to accommodate 70% of the region's growth within current urban boundaries. That is a challenging objective, particularly as the more easily developed land is taken up and redevelopment of existing low density areas is becoming necessary. Whether or not the objective is achieved will depend ultimately on the preparedness of the market to react. Waitakere's experience to date is that the market will respond, provided that the opportunities can be clearly conveyed, that the design lead can be given, and that regulatory processes can be seen as being necessary, and are efficient. On the community's behalf, it is Council's responsibility to see not only that it happens, but that it happens well.

In Waitakere it's "so far so good – watch this space".

Notes:

1. Medium density housing is defined as buildings for residential purposes up to 3 stories in height. The common form is terrace housing, usually two stories. In Waitakere there is no set minimum site size per unit, but medium density housing developments should be located on sites of no less than 2000m<sup>2</sup> (usually accommodating a minimum of 8-10 units).

2. The Waitakere developer's design guide includes guidelines for residential subdivision and medium density housing. Many design options are outlined including illustrations. Subdivision and housing elements were included in the same guide to recognise the importance of the house to street relationship. Design in accordance with the guide will meet relevant district plan criteria. (The guide may be viewed at [www.waitakere.govt.nz](http://www.waitakere.govt.nz)).