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## SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT: WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING?

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Eighty-five percent of New Zealanders live in cities and towns. The quality of urban environments therefore affects the quality of life of a majority of citizens. Urban areas are a source of resource demands, waste, and pollution. They represent New Zealand's most highly modified and highly managed ecosystems. It was a welcome event in June 1998, therefore, when the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) published a report entitled *The Cities and Their People: New Zealand's Urban Environment*<sup>1</sup>

The PCE's report is intelligent and readable. It raises issues that are fundamental to New Zealand's social, economic and environmental welfare. Ultimately, it is more important in what it has to say than Owen McShane's widely touted "think piece" on the RMA, published a few months earlier in

the year.

Preparation for the report involved the production of an urban issues paper, (released 27 February 1998), followed by discussion with some 70 agencies and individuals. Sixty three submissions were received, and have influenced the final content of the report. In consequence, the report reflects the wisdom and experience of a significant cross-section of New Zealand society.

### WHAT DOES THE REPORT SAY?

The report looks at the question of how we make our cities and towns more sustainable as places to live. It aims to bring about greater public awareness of issues affecting urban areas, and increased recognition by policy makers about the need to address issues of sustainable development. It particularly addresses regional councils

and territorial authorities as agencies which "have key roles in providing for the management of the urban environment".

As a starting point the report takes the definition of sustainable development provided by the United Nations Agenda 21 framework as, "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. iv). This definition is wider than the definition of "sustainable management" under the Resource Management Act, because it involves social and economic aspects of sustainability as well as those related to natural and physical resources.

It describes the current state of New Zealand's urban environment. The demand which each New Zealander places on their environment is described as an "ecological footprint". In the words of the report: "New Zealand's per capita footprint is 3.40 hectares, or 64 percent of New Zealand's ecologically productive land. This means that on average each person's resource requirements are provided by about 70 times the average 500m<sup>2</sup> urban section." (p. 17).

What are these resources that urban New Zealanders use? They include energy (fossil fuels and electricity), water, land, and many others. Their use involves environmental consequences: emission of green house gases, water pollution, loss of land from productive use, loss of wildlife habitat and biodiversity (eg wetlands), loss of soil resources; increases in the production of solid waste. In the 15 years from 1980 to 1996, compared with a population growth of 15.5 percent, there was a 31 percent increase in the number of cars, a 44 percent increase in energy use, a 78 percent increase in the area of urban land, and a 95 percent increase in solid waste disposal.

The report seeks reasons for this depressing environmental performance and identifies some of the following issues:

□ Lack of public leadership, foresight, and vision from all levels of government. Urban problems require long timeframes for solutions to work. At present there are no national strategies

## INCOME STATISTICS CLEARLY INDICATE A DEEPENING DIVISION BETWEEN THE RICH AND POOR, AND THIS DIVISION MAKES ITSELF MANIFEST IN THE CITIES THROUGH DIFFERENCES IN ALMOST EVERY ASPECT OF LIFE, FROM HOUSING TO SCHOOLS, HEALTH AND MORBIDITY.

or agencies that provide such foresight and direction. The role of central government is as important as that of local and regional government, because it can provide direction in terms of national policy statements, national environmental indicators, co-ordination and research (p. 30).

- Inadequate legislation for integrated urban management. The focus of the RMA is on natural and physical resources. This focus is too narrow to enable the integrated management required to achieve urban objectives such as efficient, well-run infrastructure services. According to the report, "there is a need to improve the legislative framework for local government through reviewing the LGA, and realigning some of the financial accountabilities and reporting of revenues" (p. 31). Planning needs to extend beyond the RMA framework: "Planning is more than statutory planning in accordance with a legal framework: it is 'a process by which communities attempt to anticipate and respond to change and make individual and collective existence better than it otherwise might be'. Sustainability planning, or planning for sustainability will need to be discovered in New Zealand" (p. 32).
- There is a need for partnership between central and local government and horizontally between councils at the same level. For example there is no national urban agency that can undertake research and provide information.
- Insufficient recognition and involvement of the community in participatory democracy. The report notes that "Active community participation in decision making is threatened by the number of consultation documents, submission fatigue and some consultation processes that are little more than 'window-dressing'" (p.35).
- Detrimental impacts of low-density development. The report states: "during the last few decades, population and housing growth have made urban areas less liveable with increasing traffic congestion, the loss of natural, cultural and historic heritage resources, and increasing infrastructure costs, social dislocation and isolation" (p.36)
- A need to improve "liveability" within urban areas. "Liveability" includes

aspects such as amenity, historic and cultural heritage, intangibles such as character, landscape and a sense of place, as well as characteristics that contribute to health, personal safety, and general wellbeing. It can be reinforced through urban design, and, conversely, it can be lost by a lack of design.

- Inadequate legislation and focus on issues of public and environmental health. The report points out for example that the significant potential of the Healthy Cities/Communities programme to improve urban conditions have been reduced by ad hoc approaches and variable support from government agencies (p. 39).
- Inefficient/inadequately integrated infrastructure services: infrastructure services need to be improved by:
  - improving the efficiency of transportation for the community, not the individual traveller (p. 41 - 42).
  - reducing consumption of water, and improving the recycling of wastewater into the receiving natural environment. (p.42 - 43).
  - increasing the efficient use of energy. improving waste management and reducing waste production. According to the report, "there is a lack of incentives for resource users to reduce waste and further work is required to develop national standards with more ambitious waste reduction targets." (p. 46).
- Lack of adequate indicators of environmental liveability and quality of life, and lack of monitoring to identify urban environmental trends. There is a need for more comprehensive monitoring of urban conditions through the development of urban sustainability indicators and targets.

The report concludes with some "key

messages" for environmental managers and policy makers. These messages can be summarised as follows:

- Urban management needs to move from a philosophy of "sustainable management" as defined by the RMA, to "sustainable development", as defined by UN Agenda 21 and OECD. Where the RMA steers attention toward the effects of resource use, many of the problems in the cities result from the nature and scale of resource use. Effects based management does not address the issue of how efficiently resources are used nor does it ensure that resource use promotes health and well-being of the community or the environment (does the consumption of resources make the city a better place to live in an all-round sense?).
- Urban management must involve integrated management. Integration is necessary between different levels of government as well as different areas of responsibility eg health, environment, transportation, housing, social welfare.
- Urban management requires partnerships between central, and local and regional government. Central government must be prepared to devolve some functions to local and regional levels (eg provision of public goods and services) while taking up new tasks and functions (eg co-ordinative functions between different parts of the country, research of general significance, national policy directions and national standards)
- Effective urban management requires participatory local democracy; people must be actively involved in the management of their own local environments to enable more responsive and creative solutions to urban problems

and to increase peoples' commitment and "sense of place".

□ Efficient urban management requires more and better information, monitoring and research.

## DISCUSSION

The message of the PCE's report is that we need to change the way we manage our urban environment because current trends are not environmentally sustainable and are threatening the health, well-being and quality of life of many, if not the majority of New Zealanders who live there.

Within the past decade Auckland has experienced severe emergencies in relation to water supply, electricity supply and transportation. Less noticeable, but equally problematical have been pollution of the Manukau and Waitemata harbours, increases in the number of homeless or overcrowded families in south Auckland, increases in the incidence of diseases related to poverty and overcrowding (eg pulmonary and infectious diseases), and other indicators of social and environmental stress. Each of these crises or trends have been perceived and dealt with in isolation from each other. But equally, each is in some respect a reflection of the way Auckland has been managed. In summary, they suggest that Auckland is struggling, in both human and environmental terms, to cope with development.

To lesser extent, many of the problems experienced by Auckland have also been experienced in other New Zealand towns and cities: traffic congestion; water shortages, air pollution, pollution of surface and groundwater supplies, loss of productive agricultural land, waste disposal problems, problems of unemployment, poverty, crime, homelessness, overcrowding, widespread cynicism about political leadership and public service, and widespread political apathy. They are symptoms of an urban management and political leadership that is failing to cope effectively with the challenges that face urban communities.

Many of the points made by the PCE's report have been made before. But they need to be made, over and over again. They rest on deep-seated problems, not least of the problems being the

persistent refusal of public policy makers or the wider public to take heed and treat them seriously. The problems are the result of economic, political and social patterns that structure every aspect of our society. Thus current transportation systems that depend on the car reflect and reinforce our dependence on independent individual mobility at the same time as they enable and encourage low-density urban sprawl and higher per capita energy consumption. Lack of integrated management is a symptom of an economic and political ideology that supposes that the market is the most efficient means of resource allocation and that the sum of individual welfare is equal to or greater than benefits to the community.

So the issues are not ones that can be easily or quickly solved.

One can legitimately ask: do we really need to change? There are good reasons for thinking that we do. The environmental emergencies that Auckland has already experienced are likely to be repeated, in equally unexpected form, as growth pressures continue to push at our capacity to cope. Resources such as water, land, physical space, and the air's capacity to absorb waste are in limited supply. They will be subject to greater pressures in future and we are likely to experience more conflict between competing users (eg conflict for land between housing and food production, or low cost housing versus high cost housing). Without management intervention, we are likely to see more inequality and insecurity as the weak lose out to the strong.

Equally important, in the words of the report, "New Zealand is entering a new era of globalisation where global competition is shifting the focus from countries onto cities." (p. 67). Globalisation means that Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch become competitors with Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Why invest in Auckland if Brisbane is more attractive and offers more efficient services and facilities? Why retire in Tauranga if Adelaide or the Gold Coast can offer more in the way of pleasant surroundings and lower house prices and city rates?

Although many of our present indica-

tors of well-being (eg life expectancy, infant mortality, per capita income, home ownership, car ownership, and the like), suggest that we are better off now than we were a decade ago, much anecdotal evidence suggests that most people feel no better off and many feel worse off (male suicide rates rose from 12 per 100,000 in 1970 to 38 in 1990 for 15 to 24 year olds and from 16 to 25 per 100,000 for 25 to 44 year olds).

Income statistics clearly indicate a deepening division between the rich and poor, and this division makes itself manifest in the cities through differences in almost every aspect of life, from housing to schools, health and morbidity.

Urban policy makers may be able to do little to alter or reverse the economic conditions and political policies that create the social inequalities, but they can help to develop cities that encourage a sense of community and identification with place. They can provide homes for the homeless and school locations and access networks which allow children to walk or bike safely to and from home. They can help to create neighbourhoods that counter rather than reinforce social despair. They can say no to casinos and to developments that alienate, marginalise or further impoverish the poor or socially "undesirable". (What is to be done, for goodness sake, with the socially 'undesirable' if the community does not include and provide for them; they share the human condition and cannot be conveniently eliminated).

The PCE's report makes linkages between many features of the urban environment and urban living that are not often linked in current public debate. It makes many useful and constructive suggestions for how we can begin to tackle the complexity of managing the urban environment. It is an important report that deserves to be read widely by planners, urban resource managers and policy maker makers, at all levels of government.

## FOOTNOTE

1. Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, *The Cities and Their People New Zealand's Urban Environment*, 80 pages; PO Box, 10-241, Wellington, June 1998.