

Report to the Policy and Finance Committee
from Cr Ian Buchanan, Chairperson, Environment Committee

The future of the Council's involvement in landscape

1. Purpose

To provide the Committee with additional information to support the recommendation of the Environment Committee following consideration of Report 00.67 (Attachment 1).

2. Background

The Council has made several attempts to be involved in landscape management over the past seven or so years:

- In the preparation of the Regional Policy Statement
- In the preparation of the Proposed Regional Landscape Plan (which was withdrawn)
- In the preparation of guidelines for the sustainable management of regionally significant landscapes (currently on hold)

Central to each attempt was the notion of “regionally outstanding” and “regionally significant” landscapes. Whether particular landscapes should be classified as “significant” or “outstanding” has been the subject of considerable assessment by the Council. An explanation of the assessment framework is outlined in report 1.7 of the Officer Recommendations on the Proposed Regional Landscape Plan. A copy of the Officer Recommendations is available in the Councillor's lounge.

Throughout this assessment, and following it, there has been a large amount of debate about the areas chosen. In the process, the Council has received considerable negative publicity, particularly from landowners who fear that identification of their property as an outstanding or significant landscape will infringe on their property rights.

3. **Regionally significant landscapes – can they be identified?**

The questions that we must now ask are:

- Can regionally significant and outstanding landscapes be identified?
- Is the identification of regionally significant and outstanding landscapes “too hard”?
- Should we drop these two notions and focus on generic landscape units such as coastal escarpments and ridgelines?
- Can we fulfil the expectations of the Resource Management Act, spelt out in Part II and Section 30, and achieve sustainable outcomes through alternative means?

These were the questions that the Environment Committee debated when considering Report 00.67. That report informed us of the feedback from the consultation on the development of landscape guidelines, a current project for the Resource Policy Department. Staff sought some direction from the Committee and Council on the future of the project.

Environment Committee members felt that the Council should cease work on the current landscape guidelines, and called for a report on other ways in which the Council can be involved in landscape issues. The decision was not made lightly, but reflected the realisation, made apparent during the recent guideline consultation, that the Council's decision to prepare guidelines instead of a Regional Landscape Plan has not resolved landowner concern about property rights. The Environment Committee's recommendations following this discussion are a separate item on the Agenda for this meeting.

The guideline consultation has also uncovered concern that the Landscape Plan decision did not take account of the submissions which questioned the areas identified as "regionally outstanding" or "regionally significant". In addition, the Environment Committee felt that some of the landscapes that are currently identified as regionally significant or outstanding were already protected, and no additional benefit will be gained from preparing guidelines for their management. Included in this list are Kapiti and Mana Islands, and the core areas of Castle Point and the Tararua, Rimutaka and Aorangi ranges.

4. **Alternative approaches**

The Environment Committee felt that the Council's involvement in landscape issues could be incorporated as part of other work. For example landscape benefits will come from the current project at Pauatahanui Inlet where the Council is working with Porirua City Council, Iwi, landowners and interest groups on achieving sustainable outcomes for the Inlet and its catchment. Similarly, landscape initiatives could be incorporated into the Council's soil conservation and sustainable land management programmes. The catch is that it would be useful to have a clear understanding of the landscape values associated with different areas in order to direct any changes to these programmes.

The Committee did consider that it was worthwhile investigating other ways of preparing landscape guidelines, based on landscape type rather than particular areas.

5. Implications for the Regional Policy Statement

If the Council agrees with the Environment Committee that the "regionally significant" and "regionally outstanding" landscapes cannot be identified then the Landscape and Heritage Chapter of the Regional Policy Statement will need to be amended. Currently, this Chapter refers regularly within its provisions to "regionally outstanding landscapes". As an example Policy 2 aims:

To avoid, remedy, or mitigate the adverse effects of subdivision, use, and development on regionally outstanding landscapes, and nationally and regionally outstanding landforms, geological features, soil sites, and other natural features.

As stated in the explanation to the Chapter's methods:

The most immediate need in relation to the management, protection, and use of regionally outstanding landscapes is to identify them and the values that make them special to the regional community. This requires the preparation of a definitive list of these landscapes. It also requires an assessment of the values of these landscapes to identify those aspects which are of high value and which should be taken into account when resource management decisions are made by consent authorities.

If the Council believes it is not possible to identify these landscapes then the objectives and policies of the chapter are inappropriate and need to be reviewed. Councillors should note that any change to the Regional Policy Statement must go through a formal process, and will be subject to appeal to the Environment Court. Any change to landscape provisions will be potentially contentious. Costs would include staff time, advertising, printing and (possibly) legal fees, and could run to several tens of thousands of dollars.

The Council needs also to consider the implications of any decision on those members of the public who have made the effort to be involved in the Council's past landscape initiatives. On at least two occasions the Council has put off making decisions on submissions in favour of a new approach, e.g. the decision to produce guidelines instead of continuing with the Landscape Plan.

6. Communication

If the Council withdraws from the current landscape guidelines project, the Environment Committee has recommended that this be communicated to those who have participated in the consultation, giving the reasons for the Council's decision.

7. Recommendation

That the Committee endorses the recommendation of the Environment Committee on Report 00.67.

Report prepared by:

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Chairperson, Environment Committee

Attachments: 1