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Devonport: A Sustainable Community?

Abstract

North Shore City is developing a strong environmental and sustainability ethic and is progressing a number of initiatives to minimise waste, reduce pollution of coastal waters, encourage greener transport, and generally raise public awareness and participation in sustainability.

Examples are given as implemented, and in some cases initiated, in Devonport, including resource recycling; arterial and green cycle routes; upgrading stormwater and sewerage systems and introducing holding facilities for the benefit of downstream communities; walking school buses; encouraging ferry transport; community initiative to ensure ex-Navy land was returned to open public space, and a strong focus on heritage preservation with its implicit emphasis on conservation of resources.

These initiatives reflect the four wellbeings, namely environment, economic, social and cultural, as espoused in the Local Government Act 2002.

Introduction

In January 2003 the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet released the “Sustainable Development for New Zealand - Programme of Action” which set out the sustainable development approach as:

“development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The report also went further to state that *“New Zealand needs to develop solutions and approaches that reflect our unique geography, culture and way of doing things.”* (Sustainable Development for NZ - Programme of Action, p6.)

The Programme of Action identified four key issue areas; water quality and allocation, energy, sustainable cities and child youth and development. The Sustainable Cities area became the focus in the Auckland region with all the councils coming together to identify key projects that could inform and lead the sustainability challenges facing the communities of Auckland. The successes of these efforts are well established and are continuing to contribute to sustainable development initiatives across the region, as reported in the Auckland Sustainable Cities Programme, Achievements 2003-2006, and the START project Sustaining the Auckland Region Together 2006.

Many of the projects that were undertaken as part of the Sustainable Cities programme were community led initiatives however there are many more projects and programmes across the region that are contributing towards sustainability in the region. One such community is Devonport.

This paper concentrates on the community of Devonport and its contribution (some would say pre-eminent!) to the sustainability of North Shore City (Figure 1). The paper examines the initiatives and achievements of Devonport in terms of the physical environment, the developed infrastructure, and social activity, to demonstrate the degree to which the community is, and can remain “sustainable”.

Much effort has been spent in the past decade on control of sewerage discharges at, in effect one of the headwaters of the city's wastewater system, for benefit of the whole city: this has included progressive separation of stormwater from older combined systems.

The Devonport Community Board sees the "social and cultural health" (wellbeing) of a community as being an essential part of its sustainability: why do people prefer to live there and are they enjoying the services their rates expect. While the median age of Devonport has been above average, our primary and intermediate schools are full, and providing youth activities is a priority for the Board.

Cultural health is well sustained by a high density of writers and artists well catered for with community facilities, most recently the Michael King Writers' Centre, and Council's purchase of the Victoria Theatre. Historical and heritage aspects including the built environment are seen as key elements of community sustainability and indeed are a major attraction for visitors and new residents and hence contribute to economic wellbeing.

Physical and Social Setting

The Devonport Peninsula is the area of North Shore City first visited by Maori centuries ago, and the longest settled by pakeha, since 1840. Once a series of islands and blessed with many natural features, it now guards the entrance to Auckland's Waitemata harbour, while itself protected by the very recent volcano of Rangitoto Island (Figure 2). Apart from two dominant and valued volcanic cones, Devonport has a unique feature in its Naval Base and associated facilities, providing challenges, and opportunities for community interaction.

A self governing borough since 1886, it was absorbed into the new North Shore City in 1989, despite a strong lobby for maintaining independence. This is still manifested in a tangible sense of community typified by an active Community Board, seeking and subject to close

community scrutiny; an award winning community newspaper - The Devonport Flagstaff, and particularly active sports and cultural organisations. The community is vibrant, values its natural, cultural and social heritage, and fosters environmental initiatives while not always in agreement!

Sustaining Our Environment

Given the geological youth of New Zealand, and the volcanic nature of Auckland, our initiatives are inherently limited to establishing and maintaining warning and response systems to likely natural events, principally cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruption and tsunami, not to mention an avian 'flu pandemic. There is an increasing awareness of, and preparedness for, such eventualities throughout North Shore City.

Devonport's initiatives are in fostering neighbourhood support groups to develop appropriate responses, with the underlying value of strengthening community. The District Health Board first addressed the Community Board on the implications for a 'flu pandemic, which then lead to renewed focus on neighbourhood support and linkages with civil defence to identify people's strengths and needs. Publicity on Auckland's dominant volcanism (and the most likely next volcanic site close offshore!) has been paralleled by ongoing studies of Pacific tsunami now also possibly coming southwards from Melanesia.

Civil Defence initiatives and responses, whether to cyclone, tsunami or other disturbance, will be coordinated by the City's Civil Defence Headquarters. However, the Devonport Community Board is very aware of risks to low lying areas and particularly Narrow Neck to Cheltenham beaches. The Community Board is maintaining contact with Civil Defence Headquarters and the Auckland Regional Council as results of tsunami modelling and proposals for public warning systems become available.

More immediate challenges to sustaining our environment come from invasion - by natural pests, particularly flora. Weeds flourish in our temperate, at times subtropical climate: weed spraying is contested and limited by a strong anti-spray lobby, and supported by community manual clearance.

Thanks to strong group action, and liaison with the Department of Conservation, the two volcanic cones provide prime passive recreational facilities including stunning panoramas. Other designated parks have been supplemented by imaginative development of the former municipal rubbish tip into Ngataranga Park, the old race course is leased to a public golf club and former defence land at Operetu/Takapuna Head has been secured as green space in perpetuity by the stalwart efforts of the Tamaki Preservation Trust.

These and other reserves, when coupled with all tide foreshore access at Cheltenham and Narrow Neck beaches, contribute significantly to Te Araroa, the imaginative nation-long walkway initiated by residents Geoff Chapple and Miriam Beatson. One link remains to be consolidated, around North Head, through Navy land and past the recently rebuilt Torpedo Bay Wharf, itself a Community Board initiative and proving a valued passive facility (Figure 1).

Resource management in a local sense is primarily managed by the City Council, but subject to community pressure if it sustained (drip, drip, drip!). Closure of the municipal tip in the 1980s was paralleled by the Devonport initiative for recycling lead in 1977 by Richard Tong,

environmental scientist, when recycling officer and assistant town clerk for Devonport borough. Now city-wide recycling is a part of every day life for many, either kerbside, and home composting, or through the local “waste management” centre.

There have been notable local and individual initiatives by caring residents, usually women, to develop and maintain reserve areas and focus on heritage issues, for example Mary Barrett Glade, Northboro Reserve, Mt Victoria and Mt Cambria. One of the prime attractions of Devonport to both residents and visitors is its heritage. This started with the first known Maori visit by the Tainui waka landing in Torpedo Bay (Figure 1) prior to the last Rangitoto eruption. Extensive Maori earthworks on the two volcanoes and at Takapuna Head were largely subsumed by 19th and 20th century fortifications in response to perceived invasion threats. Action by the Department of Conservation and local groups has preserved much of the latter including rare large guns as a resource for all of North Shore City and its wide range of visitors.

The efforts and achievements in preservation of urban heritage could be the subject of a separate paper: in summary much of Devonport is zoned Residential 3A giving protection to pre-1930 residences (but not yet similar commercial premises). While review of the District Plan’s provisions is in hand, with some further tightening of heritage protection probable, sustained local pressure including initiative from Devonport Heritage Incorporated, has achieved control and preservation of what makes a very desirable (and pricey!) residential area, and a prime tourist attraction. House styles range from 19th century colonial cottages and villas, early 20th century transitional villas, arts and crafts English cottage style houses and Californian bungalows through to Art Deco buildings of the 20s and 30s and English cottage revival, and State Housing of the 1940s.

A visit to Devonport will be either by road from the north, through a tree lined War Memorial drive backed by Mt Victoria, or by ferry from Auckland City to Bayswater or Devonport - which brings us literally to Infrastructure.

Sustainable Infrastructure

With commendable foresight, our City Council has recently added the superstructure of Devonport Wharf to its holding of the basic wharf structure, to safeguard our prime gateway. Rising above a somewhat chequered career as a commercial venture, there is likely collaboration with the NZ Navy in establishing its museum on the Wharf while keeping the ferry terminal.

The fully patronised ferry service, to be supplemented by an increased service at Bayswater, underscores the local focus on sustainable transport. There is some way to go in getting people out of cars, but Harbour Bridge congestion coupled with fuel prices and perceived physical wellbeing has helped promote cycling and the current formation of a green cycle route to Takapuna independent of the main arterial with its cycling limitations.

In considering the needs of future generations, we focus on the schools. Reduction of car deliveries under the Travelwise programme, and the concept of “walking school buses” has been pioneered in Devonport with the dual aims of reducing car use and congestion and promoting the children’s fitness. Inspired by Sir Peter Blake’s legacy, at least one school is actively conserving rainwater for on site use and others are addressing stream rehabilitation under the City’s Wai Care and the EnviroSchools Programme.

Substantial investment has been made in upgrading Devonport sanitary and stormwater networks in the peninsula for both local and city-wide benefit led by Community Board initiatives in the 1990s. Reduction of stormwater overflows to the sea from old combined systems, coupled with reduction of infiltration (groundwater) and exfiltration (sewage) from public drains, and development of storage facilities to reduce peak discharges and ultimately ease the load on the City's treatment plant at Rosedale Road. Particularly valuable was the "discovery", by sharp eyed engineering officers, and rehabilitation of forgotten tanks and tunnels in the Belmont area for peak storage.

A Vibrant Community

We feel Devonport hums and sometimes buzzes! The Community Board holds an open forum at the start of its monthly meeting - and seeks residents' inputs at designated working parties in the spirit of consultation as statutorily required. We have a Board member at the Library every Saturday morning for individuals' comments and complaints: usually a pleasant social occasion. Council funding supports a Community House providing a range of social services, while The Depot Artspace next door provides strong leadership in fostering all forms of artistic expression, particularly in younger folk.

Our local fortnightly newspaper The Devonport Flagstaff is essential community reading, regularly attending Community Board meetings and winning best local paper awards.

Culturally, we are recognised as having the greatest residential density of writers and artists, with the most recent achievement being establishment of the Michael King Writers' Centre in the old signalman's house on Mt Victoria. An active local museum and Library Associates work closely with Devonport Heritage and historical groups to celebrate and preserve what many see as a unique heritage, spanning close to 1000 years.

Our northern area of Bayswater/Belmont is well cared for by an active Community Committee which keeps a watch on infrastructure and facilities and the coastal environment, reporting regularly to the Board and Council.

The Community Board in partnership with the community strongly advocated and mobilised support to encourage Council to buy the historic Victoria Theatre, second oldest cinema in the world, for the benefit of the whole City.

While there is not at present a strong local iwi presence or local marae, the mana of our maunga (mountains) is well recognised and the Navy's "Taua Moana" marae is unique in its wide coverage of iwi represented in the Navy. The Community Board holds one of its meetings at the Marae each year.

Regular liaison is maintained with the NZ Navy and the associated commercial dockyard in terms of personnel and facilities interacting with the community, and in the potential impacts and opportunities in development of the substantial Naval housing asset, now in association with local iwi.

Summary of Conclusions

How do we stack up as a key element of a sustainable city in terms of the four wellbeings?

Social: active participation in local governance at grass roots: high quality of life, good range of social and recreational services across a broad spectrum of age and economic status.

Economic: healthy balance between local commerce/small business and tourism, plus Navy/dockyard.

Environment: naturally blessed with beaches and reserves; good partnerships with Department of Conservation and Defence; continuing challenges with water pollution and control of floral pests, and traffic congestion.

Cultural: alive and well in the arts and literature, well aware of heritage and history. Little cultural diversity at present; a dynamic and safe community should respond appropriately to future variety!!

It sounds easy but for the benefit of other communities and community boards the extent of public interest and agreement (or otherwise), means that the Devonport Community Board is not often short of views on issues. That is we have sufficient folk with at least and usually some knowledge to enable the Board to fulfil one of its functions under the Local Government Act 2004, which is to be an advocate for the Devonport Community. The Board members are also generally knowledgeable and offer their support to Council officers. One good example of this, and possibly unique in New Zealand, is the use of Board members as consent commissioners to make decisions on the approval or notification of potential contentious resource consent applications.

What is sometimes difficult and frustrating is the erosion of powers and responsibilities under recent changes to the Council's delegations, and the effective absence of realistic budgets to best implement some of the smaller local facilities which now get lost or deferred into a City-wide pot.

Into A Sustainable Future

At the most physical level, we are developing systems to warn of and respond to abnormal effects, ie pandemics or tsunamis. Economically we expect to retain the NZ Navy and the associated dockyard, and to develop our town centre through an ongoing Master Plan to balance our tourism magnet with due regard for local residences and business, and service to the wider city. Through our schools we are increasingly addressing the needs and the responsibilities of the next generations. Our history and heritage will continue to be protected, hopefully assisted by proposed changes in the City's District Plan. Care will be needed in dealing with our extensive shoreline, and to improve public transport and address traffic congestion. Ultimately our sustainability will be largely in our own hands, subject as always to the forces of nature and the extent to which we can work with them.

Building on from the government's Programme of Action and the Sustainable Cities projects the Auckland councils in partnership with central government have progressed a long term approach for sustainability for the region. There are many community and council led initiatives that contribute to the overall sustainability approach but it is apparent and an

imperative that long term targets start to inform decisions that impact on long term sustainability.

The idea of having a 100 year vision with key directions, goals and measures is not new and there are many examples from around the world. There are a number of outcomes that this project is seeking. These outcomes are:

- to deliver a shared long term view of the key transformational actions that will make the Auckland region more sustainable,
- provide a sustainability frame and tools to assist central and local government and key corporates to make decisions that are integrated, prioritised and resilient,
- the alignment and coordination of efforts to achieve sustainable outcomes, working from the basis of respective strengths of councils, central government, communities and stakeholders, and
- to future-proof the region's development and in particular the built form.

The long term sustainability approach is not yet confirmed but if it is adopted by the region the efforts and activities in Devonport and many other neighbourhoods, communities and groups will be part of a grand long term plan. The benefit for communities like Devonport is that they can source new ideas from the council and other participants and that future resourcing and commitments can be identified and confirmed. The Devonport community have shown that they can progress towards sustainability without a longer term sustainability framework but it is an exciting prospect to be able to look forward to a stronger commitment across the region to enable even more significant steps towards a sustainable future.

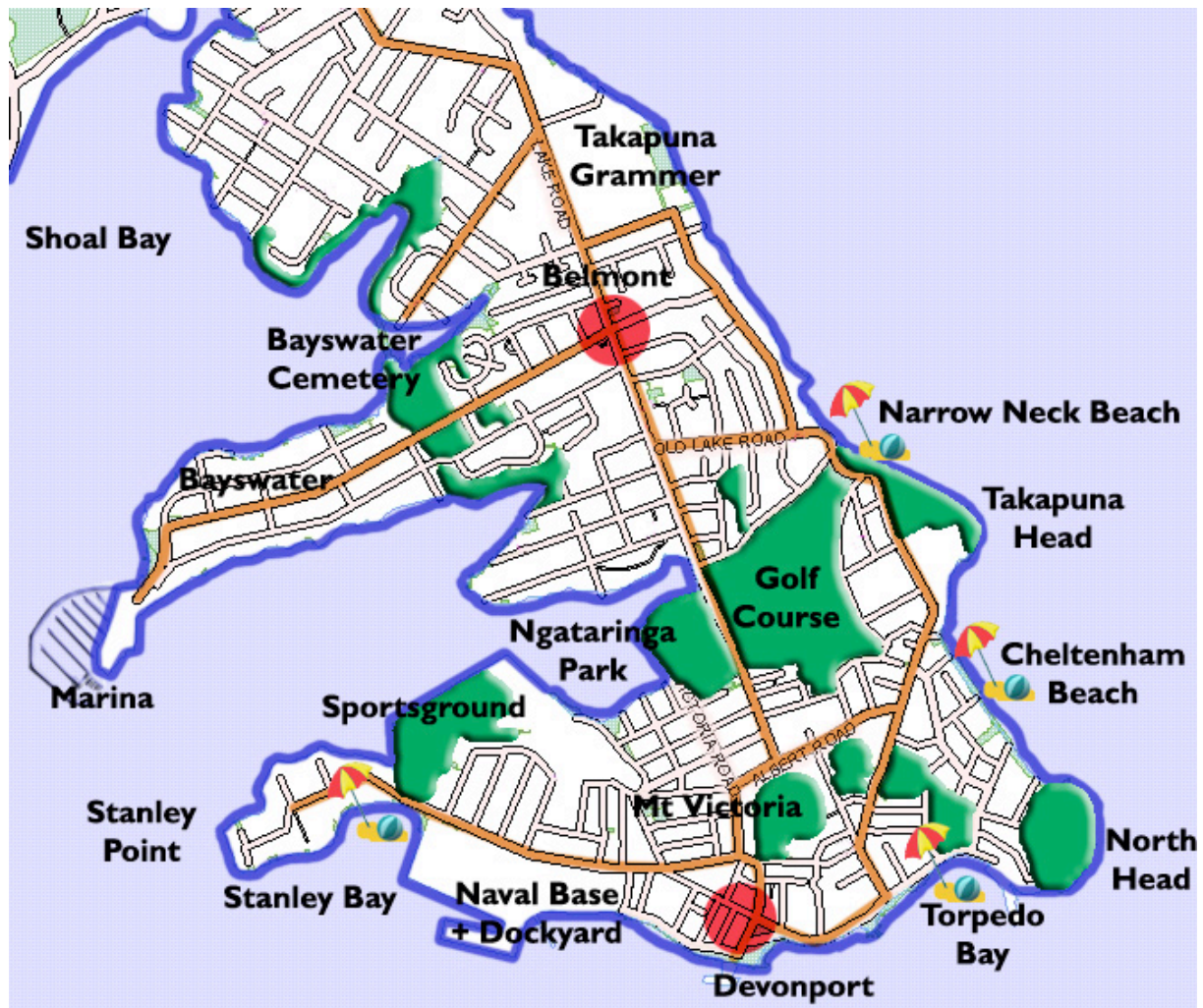


FIGURE 1: Devonport



Figure 2: Devonport with volcanoes



Auckland Isthmus with volcanoes