



ON SLOW RESIDENTS' COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION

Submission of the Onslow Resident's Community Association for the Wellington City Council 2020/2021 Annual Plan

The Onslow Residents Community Association represents the areas of Khandallah, Broadmeadows and Kaiwharawhara. Our purpose is to act as a conduit between the community and local authorities, represent the views and interests of our three communities, promote, develop and improve the public services and facilities for our community and foster a sense of community. We are a voice for our community.

Overview

The Onslow Residents Community Association is pleased to make a submission on the WCC 20/21 Annual Plan.

We would first like to make some general comments then focus on the different programme areas.

A Year of Restraint – you can't do everything!

Our major concern with this year's Annual Plan is that Council does not as a whole seem to recognise the severity of the economic crisis that is hitting New Zealand after the COVID-19 pandemic.

We recognise that Council has found \$3.2 million in savings but that was before the pandemic hit. We also are pleased that Council has not taxed rate payers with 16.9% rate rise that was apparently planned. Nor the 9.2% rise. We are concerned that this was considered acceptable to do so anyway.

More detailed financial information is required to justify the proposed rate increases both for the 2020-2021 financial year and the proposed high increases for the 2021-2022 financial year. In both cases these increases are well above inflation. Other cities provide much more detailed financial information in spread sheet form.

We note that other Councils around New Zealand are cutting their cloth and some have 0% rate rises. Why are we not emulating them?

Councillors need to balance their vision for the city with what the income generated including what the ratepayers are able to pay. We do not want to be landed with a huge debt that needs to be paid back and that will only raise rates in future years, leaving other Councillors to deal with the mess.

We advise fiscal prudence and an understanding from all Councillors that the money they are spending is primarily rate payers' money and ratepayers' debt.

We consider that Council:

- needs to cut its cloth this year to reflect the new economic reality. We would like to see some decent strategic thinking and prioritising of initiatives
- should prioritise spending on essential services to ensure the smooth running of the city – aka 'stick to your knitting'

- should only borrow if that money is seen as an investment that will add to our city's future prosperity and growth (no vanity or legacy projects)
- by all means support businesses to get back on their feet – but remember this is also a central government function
- vanity projects - projects that are not time dependent or urgent can and should be deferred
- it is important for the Council to remain committed to its long term objectives prioritising spending in this constrained year where it makes the most difference.

Council needs to put on their thinking hats – how can things be done differently, more innovatively and efficiently to cut costs and avoid \$60 million extra debt over the debt we already owe.

We would like Council to resist being short sighted and we do not want Council to lose sight of important issues to our city that will impact us – but is this the year to try and do everything?

With the borders closed and with a huge drop in Council income, the city's growth will level off (in fact it already is according to the census). Let's take a breather and reprioritise spending to reduce the amount we have to borrow.

ORCA does not agree to the amount of borrowing Council is proposing or the rate rise of 5.2%.

Governance

We acknowledge and appreciate the salary reductions council executives have taken in response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We note that many ordinary working people are on a 20% salary cut and will lose their jobs altogether once Government support stops.

We are disappointed to be presented with a business as usual plan without any choices to make savings in expenditure. We would like the Council to work in a much more integrated way and reduce the silos that make it inefficient.

We consider that a 1% efficiency savings target for this year falls well short of what would be commensurate with what many New Zealanders are facing right now. For example, looking at the Governance budget, it might be possible to make this saving just from the \$8.8m budget for running the Committee and Council processes by being radical about cutting them back this year.

We encourage Governance to take a radical approach, not just carry on business as usual. We note that the 10-year plan and future growth projections will have changed given some of the drivers have changed from the COVID-19 impacts of closing borders and driving economic recession.

We would like to see an amended annual plan that reduces council expenditure this year.

This means getting back to essential services by:

- identifying programmes that can either be cut altogether or postponed
- down-sizing services to reflect reduced demand in ways that reduce cost

Programmes funded by leveraging central government funds for 'shovel-ready' investments are very welcome, but in our view rate payers should not be funding such work.

Reliance on rates postponement, such as proposed for the 2.3% rates increase, should only be reserved for the neediest. Otherwise they just push more of this year's crisis into next year.

Transport

We note this year the combined capex and opex programme comes to \$160 million and we recognise the many initiatives that fit under this category. It is a complex area that calls for a robust overarching transport strategy that is clearly articulated. We believe that this is not currently in place.

We are concerned that the Council divides up the significant transport budget and calls for priorities for expenditure and policy that are divorced from the real needs of its residents, commuters and visitors.

The lack of analysis and research up front causes unnecessary expenditure and possibly some decisions being political in nature rather than answering the real needs of Wellington residents and businesses. We point to the Island Bay cycleway fiasco as a classic example. However we know that Wellington will need to have good cycleways as we need a transport system that doesn't rely on public transport so we are ready for the next covid wave that will happen when the borders open.

We believe Wellington needs a unified, integrated transport strategy that reflects the needs of residents, commuters and visitors.

More seriously, this approach is multiplied into the LGWM programmes. Council officers are given the invidious task of deciding how to "improve" single routes, such as the Hutt Road - Thorndon Quay artery, in the absence of strategic solutions or proper consideration of needs. It is invalid to ask the question, "Which is more important, buses or bicycles?" They are both more important and both less important, to meet different needs at different times of day.

COVID-19 and the strategic shift away from working in the central city mean the demand for routes has lessened with congestion in Wellington caused by commuting lessening as well. The transport budget is large and significant savings in expenditure would result in borrowing less lowering the suggested rate increases.

The budget for the new Island Bay cycleway is out of all proportion to the localised need of cyclists and is one area where savings could be made in this time of economic crisis.

We agree projects such as the much delayed Ngaio Gorge Slope Stabilisation and the Wadestown Route Resilience Enhancements remain a priority this year given the need to keep major transport portals open. Earthquakes remain Wellington's greatest risk.

We may be making a separate submission on the parking policy, but suffice to say that as the Council says it will not be implemented this year, we want the savings actualised by ensuring we have a unified, integrated transport strategy, which itself requires the COVID-19 impact to be evaluated.

Economic Development

We sincerely hope that the Wellington Convention Centre does not become a white elephant given the impact of COVID-19, the border closures and the long term effects on tourism and travel to Wellington city.

We know that given contractual arrangements, the convention centre cannot be stopped BUT we ask that Council keeps a very close eye on the budget pointing out how often these blow out due to poor contractual arrangements and mismanagement. We are concerned that the projects are all or nothing and suggest they should be staged so that if things changed the work that has been done to date has been repurposed for a better outcome.

We are interested in seeing new projections of the convention centre's income.

We reiterate that the council should put on hold any projects that will not return any income or benefit ratepayers at this time.

Regarding the Central Library, we note the Council has made a decision to rebuild. We believe there are other ways to develop the library. We are concerned that the decision to strengthen the building rather than rebuild was made under political pressure. We think this project needs more analysis to ensure all options are looked at including the opportunities that site presents for the city. We also believe that the decision to strengthen the existing library rather than develop and build a new generation information centre reflecting coming technologies (5G) and new ways of working and connecting, is a missed opportunity.

In line with central government, should there not be a freeze on council staff numbers for at least two years along with a freeze on salary reviews?

We also believe that organisations such as WREDA need to reconsider their budgets this year given much of their target markets will not have access to Wellington this year. They need to cut their cloth accordingly with an associated reduction in how much WCC benefits from their operations.

Cultural Wellbeing

We enthusiastically support Wellington's cultural life. We recognise the symbiotic relationship between cultural entities and the Council which builds its profile as a major New Zealand cultural centre to attract more domestic and international visitors.

The Council does not directly benefit from tourism but only indirectly when the city grows through development of new tourist infrastructure like hotels, apartments etc. and providing new revenue streams. We believe the Council should reconsider how much funding support it needs to provide under the current climate.

Cutting our cloth will mean finding efficiencies, reducing grants and other support to these entities, based on their longevity and resilience to "go it" alone or on minimal support.

Upgrades such as that planned for Wellington's museum should be postponed or reconsidered. We also believe new priorities and opportunities may emerge as we factor in the COVID-19 cost.

The Old Town Hall is another case in point. It has cost us tens of millions over budget. We need better project management with more realistic risk assessment prior to starting these huge projects.

The extensive events programme of events - – Matariki and Ahi Kā, Gardens' Magic, A Very Welly Christmas, Te Rā o Waitangi, Pasifika Festival, Sky Show. Reducing the grant and expenditure on each of above as in the current COVID climate there is bound to be a decreased demand and hence needs to be less extensive in its scope. Do we need to run them all? Or can they be scaled back? Should some of these events to be suspended for this year.

We would suggest that while it is essential to maintain the value of the assets, there should be no new purchases this year.

We agree that cultural activities such as supporting new murals and public sculptures are good for the atmosphere of the city. But again we need to cut our cloth accordingly and we believe there should be no new purchases and commissions bought this year. Alternatively, reduce grants for these projects.

The funding of cultural and art projects and performances again add to the cultural life of a city positively. But this year we recommend that you reduce grant and financial support by a percentage and the organisations should make up the short fall through their own devices.

Through the Wellington Museums Trust, they operate six venues: Wellington Museum, Capital E, Cable Car Museum, Nairn St Cottage, Space Place and City Gallery. The Council must not just turn off these grant it should work with each organisation on a recovery plan.

Social and Recreation

In the areas of Community Centres, Swimming Pools, Sports Fields and Playgrounds plans are acceptable and on the right track. If volume of usage continues to be low the Council may need to consider to reduced services.

Social Housing: Under the Healthy Homes Guarantee Act landlords must meet standards that include insulation, ventilation heating, and drainage as well as draft stopping. Wellington City Council must ensure that monitoring of landlords is carried out to ensure this happens and appropriate follow-up occurs including penalties imposed on landlords and/or reduction of rents for tenants.

Consultation over rents for social housing must be in line with wages/cost of living.

Homeless Strategy: The plan to support a strategy to move from crisis beds to transitional housing is acceptable but more detail is needed on how this is to be done and a policy of adequate accommodation provision for all (zero sleeping rough) set if people living in Wellington are to be safe.

Library Service: Libraries help to connect people and provide a focus for communities so should be preserved. We support the philosophy of removing as many barriers to accessing the available library services and collections as possible.

In regard to the Central Public Library and the decision on whether to demolish and rebuild or strengthen the existing building, it is important that a range of expert views are analysed to ensure the best decision is made on the options.

Cost is an important consideration but so is safety. The areas of beauty and originality of a particular design are of lesser importance than its safety and usability. The supporters of retaining and strengthening the existing Central Library may be influenced in this decision by mistakenly thinking that the design will be unaltered by the strengthening work. This is a false assumption and the design changes to comply with the current NBS standard will necessitate major design changes.

Urban Development

We strongly agree the Council must continue with its strategy to make the City more resilient such as using the Built Heritage fund to progress earthquake strengthening. This work increases the resilience of the city and adds to the city's desirability as a place to both live and visit.

Environmental

More focus is needed on the long term disposal of waste. We would like the Council to consider reducing the amount of sewage it puts into landfills. The Council intends to extend the Southern Landfill in 2023 but consideration should be given to other solutions too (eg. Singapore's solution of turning waste into energy).

We are keen for the Council to come up with a solution to manage the sewage sludge that is put into the Southern landfill. The sludge contains pathogens and these can get into the waterways and cause contamination. We think that sludge should be treated with a focus on land application and re-use.

The plan needs to have more focus on educating people about the correct use of storm water drains and how to protect waterways. The plan needs to ensure monitoring processes take place in regard to how people and businesses use waterways.

Priorities should be set on what is important - replacement of sewage pipes and ensuring water is clean is of absolute importance for the health of people. The Council needs to plan regular maintenance of infrastructure and not wait until pipes burst before replacing them.

The Council should be completely sustainable in its operations and encourage all Wellington businesses to be too.

Any further financial support for Wellington Water Limited including additional funding for water leak detection and repair, condition assessment of assets and the additional cost of sewage sludge disposal should be contingent on the current effectiveness and efficiency of them carrying out their operations. There is no question that we need to fix sewage leaks but cost efficient techniques should be used such as tracing with dye and other new techniques.

We support the Council's commitment to reducing waste and investigating a resource recovery centre. While we also believe council must remain committed to its long-term objectives, any reduction in waste must be thought of with a cost recovery and commercial aspect.

We also support incentivised waste diversion and sustainable waste solutions.

We are pleased to see the council signalling a shift to a Circular Economy mindset, and we encourage the council to consider this as a framework for wider waste issues, such as sewage sludge and construction waste, as well as household and kitchen waste. Waste should be seen as a resource wherever possible.

We accept the extension of the landfill as a transitional solution, but strongly urge WCC to link the extension to a commitment to a sustainable long-term alternative to landfilling sewage sludge in order to minimise future landfilling.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. We will also be sharing this submission with the residents in the affected areas as well as in ORCA's communications with our members.

Please feel free to contact our association at onslowcommunityassociation@gmail.com or by phone on 0274 511 366 regarding this submission.

Yours sincerely

Nicola McFaull, President on behalf of

Onslow Residents' Community Association