

SPC 8 September 2011
Tabled Information
Reference 221/11P(a)
Waterfront Framework Review – Report 4 to Strategy and Policy Committee

Submission from Wellington Civic Trust – 8 September 2011

The Trust agrees with the main finding of the report - that the framework is fit for purpose. The Trust has never understood why the Council would wish to disturb a set of objectives and principles which were the product of a consultative and collaborative process and which had successfully established benchmarks for evaluating specific proposals.

However, we are pleased that the opportunity was taken to go beyond a simple answer to a simple question about the utility of the Framework and find out what the general public, through the use of focus groups, and the special interest groups, through interviews, thought about the health of the project. The Trust was also pleased to be invited to participate. Unfortunately our pleasure was short-lived. The views of Waterfront Watch, Architectural Centre and the Wellington Civic Trust, have been condensed into five lines of typed comment in the feedback report. Those interviews would have involved some three hours of detailed questions to, and comments from, the three organisations. All you are told is that their views largely mirror “those of the public focus groups.”

Anyone who knows the views of the three interest groups selected for interview will be aware they are not as one on, for instance, the balance between new construction and open space.

The only way in which the disparate views of those organisations can be said to accord with the views of the focus groups is if the latter's views are so imprecisely expressed as to be made to fit any interpretation. The report achieves that dubious purpose.

In the third paragraph of section 6 of the report the focus groups were said to:

“ like the current balance of built form and open space and would like this to continue to the northern part of the waterfront which desperately needs improving”

'Desperately' is a strange word to use in that context and what is meant by 'the current balance of built form'? As you will know the *current* balance of built form does not involve the three buildings proposed for North Kumutoto, the construction of which is dependent both on the approval of Variation 11 and finding developers. Neither does the *current* balance include the three buildings which were proposed for Waitangi Park.

If the focus groups are saying 'we like the waterfront as it is- do no more new building' – then Waterfront Watch will be well pleased. But the organisation I represent would not. We believe that building on sites 9 and 10 at North Kumutoto is justified and, irrespective of design considerations, probably necessary to avoid the ratepayer being presented with a very large bill.

But we do not really know what the public thinks. Maybe they would rather pay than lose public open space to more buildings. This exercise had the opportunity to help clarify that issue – on the basis of the feedback report it has served only to confuse it.

I quote from my notes which I used for the meeting with Litmus (a copy of which I left with them):

Issue is not no new buildings, but rather the balance between buildings and open space and the height and mass of new buildings. Framework is still sound on this, but WWL and Council need a better indication of how the public want those principles interpreted especially at Kumutoto and Waitangi.

We are particularly concerned about the Waitangi Park sites. We know that neither of the two public-use buildings, the UN Studio and Wardle Architects designs, will now go ahead.. So what is proposed for those sites? What process is proposed for reconsidering future use? How will the public be involved?

The Trust believes that the Council should make constructive use of the current market conditions to thoroughly review its options for Waitangi. There should be a public discussion.

In contrast to the sparse and inadequate feedback from the public, the report devotes a full page to the views of TAG. We endorse much of what TAG has to say. We especially welcome the comments on public access to ground floors. In our discussions with Litmus we suggested that somebody, the waterfront company and/or the building owners, had misread the market in terms of appropriate rentals, particularly in respect of the Chaffers Dock ground floor. We assume that any waterfront space would be rentable at a price.

If the Council determines to build another seven or so new buildings on the waterfront, it will need to find a way to deal with this problem. We think you will be disappointed if you pin your hopes on better access from the CBD. A test will be provided by the rebuilt OPT. Ground floor space on a long finger wharf, well away from established foot traffic, is not a formula for the designers' much beloved active edges.

TAG's final comment is a lament that whereas lucky Auckland does not have to bother about what its citizens want on their waterfront, in Wellington consents have to be notified and people may derail a developer's best laid plans by objecting and then appealing. The Trust opposed Variation 11, because we thought it provocative and unnecessary – the same certainty for developers could have been achieved if sites were marketed with consents already attached. Indeed that approach had been recommended to this committee by officers in December 2008. On the other hand the Variation process achieves much the same opportunity to object and appeal and Waterfront Watch and others have done so. What surprises the Trust about Variation 11, is that what was seen as a matter of great urgency in 2009, now ambles along the hidden paths of mediation.

I draw the committee's attention to a comment in the third paragraph of section 6 of your report:

“Whatever decisions are made must be taken with extreme caution and very careful consideration as we have got it wrong a few times , for example Queens Wharf.”

That is a perceptive comment. If we have now a project which largely meets the expectations of the public (and we all deserve some credit for that), we did not get there by rushing into building 31 storey towers, or hotels with problems of access, or by shifting heritage buildings around the wharf as if they were chess pieces. We did it by allowing for second thoughts, by acknowledging that a place for people can only be created by listening to people. That might not be the way they do it in Auckland, but so far at least we in Wellington are not encumbered by a local government structure that inhibits public engagement. Our disappointment with the Litmus exercise, as reported, is that this opportunity to engage was not as productive as it should have been.

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