



## **Submission on the Discussion Document**

### ***“Building Sustainable Urban Communities”***

**From**

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## **BUILDING SUSTAINABLE URBAN COMMUNITIES**

### **A discussion document exploring place-based approaches to sustainable urban development in New Zealand.**

This discussion document is a good compilation of means to improve processes and procedures involved in urban development, and in that sense it is valuable and its publication is useful.

In another, more serious sense, however, it largely fails to address the central issue explicit in its title (viz. sustainability), and a response to that problem is the reason for this submission by Sustainable Otautahi Christchurch (SOC).

The logical precondition for any discussion on the topic of the document is surely that of making clear what is meant by the qualifying term “sustainable”. Only after this is done can the meaning of the phrase “Building sustainable urban communities” become clear. Simply inserting the word “sustainable” into “Building urban communities” does not make that happen.

The document's focus on structural, administrative and legal matters, while useful, results in a failure to address the bigger sustainability picture, to incorporate issues such as peak oil, climate change and severe global economic uncertainties, all of which will have major effects within a relatively short timeframe, on the total context within which any and all urban developments proceed.

In particular, this bigger picture must acknowledge the nature and challenges of the social, economic or environmental drivers and relationships that are the keys to achievement of successful and sustainable – or failed unsuccessful and unsustainable - urban developments.

In this context, we would emphasise that sustainable development is basically a process of institutional transformation that is grounded in a morality – just as the modern state is founded on a social contract. SOC has identified this morality as well-expressed by the statement *“All people have their basic needs satisfied, so they can live in dignity, in healthy communities, while having the minimum adverse impact on natural systems, now and in the future.”*

In order to ground the document properly, it would have been helpful to list and address some of the highly unsustainable aspects of current urban settlements, to help focus on what is actually needed for sustainability (itself understood as the Strong Sustainability definition, not the Weak version). These could include some of the following serious threats to long-term sustainability in NZ, all of which must be addressed at several levels, but especially urban settlements:

- Fossil fuel use – increasing
- Greenhouse gas emissions – increasing
- Transport – numbers of vehicles, motorways, airport extensions – increasing
- Water abstraction and use – increasing
- Housing affordability – declining
- Rich-poor gap – increasing
- Finally, the State of the Environment Report (2007) clearly identified areas of our environment that are in a poor state of health and many of these areas are affected or influenced by our urban lifestyles.

Note that these issues relate mainly to existing urban areas. They reflect the need to address the bigger sustainability picture and rethink existing major physical and social infrastructure issues such as those bulleted above, before embarking on new ones. The issues need urgent attention. The ability to address them adequately will demonstrate whether constraints that relate to new developments are really understood.

A further relevant issue is that of increasing house sizes leading to greater ecological footprint. Consumerist pressure to buy (and use) more electrical and electronic goods is a further factor. Social equity issues and social or community housing needs should be included also.

A consequential question is, what are the criteria proposed to be used for evaluating and monitoring the sustainability of development in urban areas? Without appropriate and verifiable criteria, the planning processes discussed in the document will have little point, since they will not be subject to the feedback and guidance that will ensure they proceed to achieve what is intended, as in the title of the document.

There is an abundance of material from the scientific literature on both sustainability science and technology, and on ecological and biophysical economics, to show what is needed for NZ to move from its current highly-unsustainable trajectory towards one that is fully sustainable. This material reflects international, regional, local and personal perspectives, from a wide range of scientific bodies, governments, commerce, non-government (ngo) and tangata whenua organisations and movements. Some highly relevant examples of such movements include Post Carbon Cities, Transition Towns and Relocalization, all of which are easily found on the web.

Unfortunately, there is little attention paid in the document to the scientific literature, tangata whenua initiatives or ngo movements, apart from some minor comments on reducing transport and intensifying urban settlements. In our opinion, this is a serious defect, since by failing to do so the unsustainable ideas of the past are very much at risk of being promulgated into the future. That the challenges that face us are serious and difficult is no excuse for ignoring them, or relegating them to the “too hard” basket.

SOC submits that this omission be addressed and asks that we be informed of how that will be undertaken.

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.