

# Wellington Town Belt: From Management Plan to Action Plan

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## Introduction

Wellington owes much of its character to its Town Belt - a legacy of the early settlers. It was set aside by the New Zealand Company in 1839 and held originally by Central Government. Under the 1873 Deed, the Town Belt was conveyed to the Wellington City Council for the "enjoyment of the public".

At first, the Town Belt was simply an area of open space close to the city for people to enjoy walking, picnicking and sightseeing. Over the years it has undergone many changes. Between 1840 and 1940 more than one third of the original 625 hectares was removed from the Town Belt with the majority of this occurring while under the Crown's control. Victoria University, parts of Kelburn and Vogeltown, Wellington Hospital, Government House and Wellington College are all built on land that was once part of the Town Belt.

As the city expanded, parts were also taken for roads and public works. Since 1940 there have been few encroachments. Land has, in fact, been recently added to the Town Belt.

A significant part of the Town Belt has also been developed for public and club recreational facilities - sports grounds, tennis and squash courts, golf course, bowling and croquet greens, playgrounds and parks.

The native forest that originally covered much of the Town Belt was cleared and until the 1920s the land was grazed. Consequently, much of the area was bare of trees for 50 years or more.

From the 1870s to the 1930s, mainly pine, macrocarpa and gums were extensively planted to beautify the hills and control the spread of gorse. These plantations are now mature and native vegetation is also regenerating.

The Town Belt currently comprises 425 hectares of which 388 hectares are legally held upon trust and subject to the powers of the Deed. The 37 hectares that is not subject to the Deed is nevertheless managed as part of the Town Belt (e.g., 25 hectares comprises the Botanic Garden).

## The Town Belt Management Plan

The Town Belt Management Plan adheres to both the spirit and content of the original 1873 Deed. The Deed in effect is a self-contained code, which provides for the use, maintenance and protection of the Town Belt. However, the Deed in some respects is too general to

provide certain guidance and direction. The Wellington City Council recognised the need for a comprehensive Management Plan that provides for continuity of management and contains detailed policies on many matters not anticipated at the time the Deed was prepared.

Initial work on the draft plan, started in 1991, involved research and the preparation of a series of background reports covering the legal, administrative, vegetation, landscape, recreation, history and Maori aspects. Public submissions were invited in 1991 and 120 submissions, many of which were very detailed, were received from organisations and individuals.

A Town Belt Management Plan Sub-Committee was established by Council in late 1993 to draft and review policies and oversee the preparation of the Plan. Public submissions on the draft plan were called for and many were received. Hearings were held to consider the submissions and numerous amendments were made. On 14 December 1994 Wellington City Council formally adopted the Plan.

## Structure of the Plan

The Management Plan consists of Part 1, *General Policies*, and Part 2, covering policies specific to the 9 management areas within the Town Belt; Tinakori Hill, Kelburn Park, Aro Valley, Brooklyn Hills, Macalister Park, Golf Links/ Mt Albert, Newtown/ Crawford, Hataitai Park, and Mt Victoria.

The Botanic Gardens and Zoo, although part of the Town Belt, have their own comprehensive plans and so are not covered specifically.

The management areas were defined so that, where necessary, policies specific to the varied localities within the Town Belt could be clearly explained and identified. Complementary to the General Policies, these also reflect the spirit and interest of the Deed.

Part 1, *General Policies*, include brief background information on the legal description, physical and natural environment, history, Maori issues and current use.

The General Policies document also contains the aims and objectives, and policies that affect the whole of the Town Belt. These are arranged under four separate headings:

- Administration
- Recreation

- Vegetation Management
- Interpretation and Education

Policies in part 2 for each of the management areas are arranged under the same headings.

Under each policy heading there is a brief preamble describing the background and rationale behind the policy or policies that follow. All efforts were made to ensure that policies are clear, concise and unambiguous.

### The key policy areas are:

- **Vegetation:** The Town Belt's vegetation is recognised as a significant component of Wellington's landscape. The present vegetation has been accepted collectively as the starting point for the future vegetation and its management. Very little planned planting has occurred in the last 30 years, and the future of the early planting now needs to be decided. It is proposed that native vegetation be progressively established on a much greater proportion of the Town Belt than at the present time.
- **Recreation:** The emphasis is on informal recreational activities and there shall be no additional land developed for organised sports facilities on the Town Belt.
- **Walkways:** Routes shall be rationalised to ensure easy, safe access for all sectors of the community, with an emphasis on well-marked, circular routes. Both the Northern and Southern Walkways will remain, to be maintained to a high standard.
- **Interpretation:** Despite the fact that the Town Belt is on the doorstep of central Wellington, surprisingly few people know of its extent, its history, the ecological lessons it can provide, or the recreational opportunities it offers. The Management Plan addresses these issues and proposes ways that the Town Belt can become integral to the 'Wellington Experience'.
- **Leases:** Many sports clubs and other organisations have leases on the Town Belt. Criteria for leases have been prepared along with terms for existing leases and rentals to be charged.
- **Access:** Public access for all, as intended by the Town Belt Deed, is to be upheld with emphasis on pedestrian access and strict controls on vehicles.
- **Encroachments:** There were over 200 illegal encroachments on the Town Belt when the Plan was adopted. A procedure for dealing with these encroachments has been formulated and is described in the Plan. No new encroachments are permitted.
- **Utilities and Commercial Use:** Future applications for these uses must comply with guidelines

formulated to protect the recreational nature of the Town Belt.

- **Acquisition:** Land has been lost from the original Town Belt due to pressures from other uses. Council shall acquire land or the use of land adjacent to the Town Belt to try to regain the visual and physical continuity of the original concept.

### Since the Management Plan

Wellington City Council gave immediate effect to the Management Plan. A Town Belt curator was appointed and Roger Still held this position until illness forced him to relinquish it in 1998. Roger had played a lead role in the preparation of the Management Plan and the investigations that had preceded it since 1991. Derek Thompson replaced Roger and is the current curator but unfortunately, as a result of Council restructuring, overseeing the Town Belt is not Derek's sole focus as was the case with the inaugural appointment and as recommended in the Management Plan.

Many projects were initiated and completed under Roger Still as curator. An immense amount of effort was put into making a start on resolving the many encroachments; this work continues to be a major activity of Derek and his team. Even those encroachments that may initially seem simple and straightforward are rarely so and many are difficult and complex. To date 88 of the original 219 encroachments (ie 40%) have been satisfactorily resolved with a further 14 encroachments in the process of being resolved.

Work started almost immediately on the alienation of Town Belt land issues that had been initially researched and documented in the Management Plan. Negotiations and legal proceedings to have large blocks of land held by Telecom on Tinakori Hill, by Wellington Hospital and by Government House in Newtown returned to the City and managed as part of the Town Belt are ongoing and complex. Getting the Government and others such as Telecom to agree that these blocks of land were appropriated from the Town Belt, despite the extensive research and records to substantiate the fact has been a huge task and one that has not yet succeeded. This work will continue for many years and the Council and others have put significant resources and effort into it.

A Friends of the Wellington Town Belt was formed in 1997 with John Gilberthorpe, (a former Wellington City Councillor who chaired the Town Belt Management Plan Working Sub-Committee charged with preparing the Plan), as the Friends' inaugural Chairman. The Friends have focused their energies on several fronts, and whilst it maintains a sound working relationship with the Council, the Friends is fiercely independent and will remain so. The Friends main efforts to date have been in two areas - campaigning to see the return of alienated lands such as those areas mentioned above and public education and awareness of the Town Belt's

attributes and values. The Friends have organised many talks from specialists on different aspects of the Town Belt - its history, native vegetation, recreation, and extensive pine plantations.

'On the ground', major projects have been initiated and completed. The City to Sea Walkway, was built in stages and is a fantastic addition to Wellington's already extensive walkway network. Starting from the heart of the city and travelling through the city's southern suburbs the walkway emerges on the south coast providing the north - south, city -sea link as envisaged in the Management Plan.

Two other areas of activity on the Town Belt underwent a renewed focus upon completion of the Management Plan and these initiatives form the current focus - planting of native vegetation, and removal and management of the conifer plantations.

In 1997 the City Council, as a trial, engaged a forestry consultant to prepare a detailed vegetation management plan of one of the Management Areas on part of the Town Belt in the south of the city (Management Area 7). A detailed assessment of condition of the conifers, their life span, when they should be removed and how this should be done, and an assessment of wood volumes and returns, was completed as well as preparing details on how the area should be replanted - the type of species, timing, and cost.

Concurrently, a trial extraction of groups of hazardous and over-mature trees was carried out on another part of the Town Belt. Conifers, mainly radiata pine, are located on much of the middle and upper steep slopes of Tinakori Hill. The suburbs of Thorndon and Wadestown occupy the lower slopes and in many places the large over-mature pines sit immediately and hazardously above houses. Because of the steep terrain, difficult access and close proximity of houses, a helicopter was used to extract the trees. Such methods are regularly used in forestry but the value of the timber and the need to minimise damage to adjacent ecologically important vegetation warrants this. The value of the timber in the extensive unmanaged exotic conifer stands on Wellington's Town Belt has little or no economic value so tree extraction, by helicopter or otherwise, represents a significant cost.

Most conifers stands are of an even age and have not been managed as exotic forests. The conifers were planted because of their ability to grow on a wide variety of sites, they were cheap and because of their rapid growth. In a relatively short period, Wellington's barren Town Belt supported a tall forest, a legacy that we place enormous value on.

It is timely therefore, that the next major phase of the development of the Town Belt has commenced. Based on the objectives and policies in the Management Plan, the City Council has commissioned the preparation of a Town Belt Implementation Plan, an action plan to cover the next 20 years.

## Town Belt Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan focuses on how to manage the vegetation, while access and recreation will be taken into account, they are, by comparison, secondary issues. To many people the Town Belt is its vegetation, particularly its woody vegetation - the stands of conifers, eucalypts, regenerating native vegetation and various deciduous exotic trees. There are of course parts of the Town Belt that are mown grass - in sports fields, the Berhampore Golf Links, in rough grass and exotic perennials, and regenerating exotic scrub communities.

The Implementation Plan is to be an internal working document for the Council explaining what needs to be done to manage the vegetation, how it should be done and when, and with sufficient levels of generic costings to allow adequate funding to be set aside in Council's annual plans over the next two decades.

The vegetation management policies and strategies in the management plan do not represent the views of just one person but are a synthesis of many different perspectives - Council staff, Councillors, specialist consultants, and importantly, the various user groups and public who were consulted and made submissions as part of the management plan process.

The background reports prepared in 1991 on the Ecology, Environmental Forestry, History and Landscape are particularly relevant with regard to vegetation as is the detailed Vegetation Management report prepared for Management Area 7 in 1997. Both the Ecology and Environmental Forestry reports record in detail the existing vegetation - its composition, health, successional trends, etc. The Landscape report describes the overall context of the vegetation and the contribution it makes to landscape character whilst the History report provides a social context and appreciation of why and when certain types of species were planted.

The Management Area 7 Vegetation Management report translates a lot of this into details of how, when and at what cost.

The starting point for the future vegetation cover has always been the existing vegetation. The forest cover that we have on the Town Belt today has taken many years and a great deal of effort to develop; in most places it has been hard won.

The 'General Policies' document provides the rationale, outlines the vegetation management strategies and lists the policies that apply to the Town Belt overall. The specific policy documents for each of the 9 Management areas explain and illustrate in detail, the strategies for each area.

The vegetation management regime proposed for each area has been formulated in accordance with the existing vegetation, prevailing site conditions, existing and potential recreation use and landscape considera-

tions. The strategies, by their very nature are long term and are to be achieved gradually by modifying the existing vegetation; wholesale change of the vegetation will not occur.

In addition, the success of the strategies will depend upon preparation of detailed implementation programmes, the first of these covering the next 20 years, will be completed and approved by the middle of 2000. Implementation does not simply mean tree removal and planting programmes but also allowance of resources for maintenance and monitoring.

The main thrust of the vegetation strategies are:

- Native vegetation over a greater proportion of the Town Belt than at present
  - 60% of the area (254 hectares) compared to the current 20% or 92 hectares.
  - The change of emphasis does not occur in all of the Management Areas.
  - This native vegetation is proposed to be developed from:
    - existing areas of native vegetation;
    - gradual replacement of most of the areas of rank grass and exotic scrub; and
    - replacing areas of conifer forest, most notably on Tinakori Hill.
- Large areas of conifers and mixed conifer/eucalypt forest to be retained in several areas, particularly on Mt Victoria. In addition, smaller stands of conifer forest will be perpetuated as landmark features and/or demonstration forest plots in various Management Areas.
- Areas of mixed woodland to be retained and expanded in several areas to provide seasonal variety.
- Many areas of mown grassland to be managed as perennial meadow.

Implementation of the strategies in terms of priorities, resources and the time frame for them to be carried out is the current focus of the Wellington City Council.

The Management Plan advocates that the Town Belt's forests must be multi-purpose forests, planned and managed to meet the varied requirements of the people living around it.

- The importance of the Town Belt's vegetation as a visual asset in the city need to be recognised.
- The Town Belt is also a place for recreation. This means providing a range of environments to cater for varied activities and preferences - walks in both native and exotic forest, places to enjoy seasonal changes in vegetation, open ground for sport and play, opportunities to escape the city and to appreciate its beauty.
- The Town Belt is also widely perceived and valued as a natural environment within the city. It can be

seen and managed as an urban ecosystem, with potential to educate people about native forest succession, exotic forest management and the impact that our activities have upon vegetation of all types.

The management proposals, then, aim to achieve a balance between these various factors and, of course, the site conditions, which are also a determining factor.

Time does not allow all the Management Areas to be covered here. Instead, three key areas have been selected to illustrate the determining factors and the kind of information contained in the proposals.

#### • Tinakori Hill

As with all the management areas, the existing vegetation is the starting point for future management. Conifers currently form the dominant canopy on much of the Hill with regenerating native vegetation to the south, in the gullies and as an understorey on the lower slopes. Exotic broadleaf species also form a component at the base of the hill.

It is proposed that all but the lowest edge be returned to native podocarp dominant forest in the long term. The key factors influencing this decision were:

- Tinakori Hill is the largest area of south-east facing slopes in the Town Belt which, being cooler, more sheltered and moister, provide the most favourable conditions for this forest type;
- Otari-Wilton's Bush, in the next valley, is a potential seed source if connecting wildlife corridors can be enhanced.

The exotic deciduous component at the base of the slopes is to be retained as a complement to the adjacent Botanic Garden, most particularly for its seasonal foliage display.

This is a major change but a gradual staged approach over a number of decades is advocated to ensure that there is continuity of forest cover. This means:

- thinning of the conifers to encourage native understorey development,
- enrichment planting of native species where regeneration is well established,
- gradually working up and out from the moister gully and lower sites as the native vegetation establishes.

This would see a gradual reduction of the conifer canopy over a number of decades, with forest cover retained during the transition phase. In the long term, an equally striking forest backdrop would be achieved to that of the present day.

#### • Mt Victoria

Mt Victoria is a similarly large landform associated with a prominent skyline and an important backdrop to the city. However, the site conditions are very different. These slopes are north and west facing,



exposed not only to the sun but also to the drying effect of the prevailing north-westerly wind. These factors, combined with poor, thin soils on the upper slopes, indicate that if native vegetation were to be established it would be of a low scrub type rather than a tall forest type.

This type of vegetation would significantly alter both the visual character of the ridge and the recreational environment. Mt Victoria is one of the most intensively used areas of the Town Belt. Public submissions indicated that tall forest environments are an important part of the Town Belt's attraction, with the open understorey found under conifer forest, and environment preferred by certain users.

Bearing all these factors in mind, it was considered that the predominant conifer/ eucalyptus canopy should be retained and perpetuated by gradual replanting. As pictured, the character would remain much the same. The main changes would be:

- extending the conifer/ eucalypt mix to the slopes above Wellington College to unify the visual character,
- extending the planting higher up the slope to conceal the unsightly roading scar there,
- encouraging native coastal forest to develop on a moister gully areas behind Oriental Bay,
- replacing mown grass on the steep summit ground with low native shrub cover.

Once again, long-term management calls for a conservative, gradual management strategy to ensure that forest cover would be retained. Replanting of conifers, for instance, would be done by thinning and underplanting of small areas on a progressive basis.

#### • Brooklyn Hills

A very different management area is the Brooklyn Hills. This is a less prominent part of the Town Belt, comprising a complex series of moister gullies and drier, exposed spurs. There is varied recreation potential including the gardens of Central Park, the sports grounds and walking opportunities.

The varied site conditions are reflected in the complexity of the existing vegetation. The scattered mix of exotic broadleaf species and conifers, scrub, rank grassland and native regeneration lacks visual unity.

The main proposals are to:

- develop a more unified framework of native vegetation principally in the gullies,
- to retain some conifer stands as landmark plantings,
- to retain the open character of the spurs as viewpoints and walking routes,
- to enhance the existing mixed woodland of Central Park more as an arboretum and to complement the Botanic Garden.

Once again the strategy for achieving these objectives

is gradual. Native regeneration is already occurring in the gullies or as an understorey beneath the exotic planting. Weed control and enrichment planting would encourage its development. Where conifers are to go in the long term, trees will only be removed if they present a hazard or will be thinned and the remaining trees left for their natural life span.

The proposals for Central Park would need detailed design when resources permit, but, in the meantime, the existing tall framework vegetation is essentially self-managing.

## Summary

Overall, the vegetation proposals have been determined on the basis of site conditions, recreational use, visual consideration and the preferences expressed in public submissions.

Currently there is a roughly equal distribution of conifers, other exotic vegetation, grass and native vegetation throughout the Town Belt. A significant change to this is recommended in the Management Plan:

- a substantial increase in the proportion of native vegetation to provide a basic unifying framework for the Town Belt,
- the conifer component remaining principally on the Mt Victoria summit ridge with only smaller landmark stands elsewhere,
- the areas of mixed woodland, often with deciduous species, which already exist on several suitable sites around the Town Belt, will be retained for their amenity value and seasonal interest.

Active vegetation management is going to be needed and the Implementation Plan will provide the details for this.

- Although the conifer forests will grow on for several decades, a replanting programme will be needed to perpetuate these forests where desired,
- Enrichment planting will be needed if native vegetation is to breach its climax state as seed sources are lacking within the Town Belt for the late successional and climax species,
- Invasive weeds, which threaten the health of both native and exotic forest environments throughout the Town Belt, will be a continual responsibility.
- Hazard trees are already an issue on the Town Belt and as these trees get older this will become more of an issue. Wellington City Council prepared a Hazard Tree Assessment in 1998, ranking the level of risk in different parts of the Town Belt.