

Submission to Auckland Council  
on its  
2017 annual budget  
by  
Stop Auckland Sewage Overflows Coalition

## **OVERVIEW OF SUBMISSION**

The Stop Auckland Sewage Overflows Coalition is a recently formed coalition of community-based organisations, mainly from older parts of the city, with a shared concern about the current state of Auckland's drainage infrastructure.

These concerns have their genesis in the lack of progress in eliminating continuing overflows of highly polluted water into public recreation areas such as Okahu Bay, Hobson Bay, Judges Bay, St Mary's Bay, Herne Bay, and Meola reef (to name just a few). These overflows are a direct consequence of aging pipes being unable to cope in times of high rainfall: the pipes have a "dual carriageway" (a partial horizontal divider), in which sewage and stormwater are carried separately but mix with any more than light rainfall (which causes the stormwater to spill over its side of the divider and mix the two flows).

There is a general public concern about the state of Auckland drainage infrastructure, evidenced in a series of articles in The New Zealand Herald in January of this year<sup>1</sup>.

The coalition's purposes include:

(a) To encourage, support and maintain the goal of achieving the highest water quality practically possible in the waters of the central and western bays of the Waitemata Harbour and generally in Auckland's harbours and watercourses.

(b) To promote objective investigation into options for and economic viability of improvements to Auckland's drainage infrastructure, particularly in the Western Bays and other areas that are served by combined stormwater and sewage systems.

The primary thrust of this submission is to persuade Auckland Council to allocate funds specifically in this year's budget for a comprehensive review of its current plans for upgrade of the city's drainage infrastructure, with a particular focus on separation of sewage from stormwater in the older parts of the city (where the majority of the combined pipes remain).

The coalition appreciates that Mayor Goff has called for a review. It has not seen the terms of that review but has a concern that it will result in no more than a repetition of the council's managers' case for its current solutions, which are understood to exclude separation. The coalition

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<sup>1</sup> The NZ Herald, 21 January 2017

understands [on the other hand] that separation of the old combined pipes is the solution most likely to eliminate sewage in overflows. The coalition wishes to see Auckland Council demonstrate its intention to eliminate the sewage overflows by ensuring that Auckland Council's review is a comprehensive one that the public can accept with confidence<sup>2</sup>. It can do so by having the review group include representation from Watercare and an appropriate public health organisation, by allocating funds for an objective peer review, and by permitting (and funding) selected organisations (such as the coalition) to participate in the fact-finding stage, with appropriate engineering and public health input.

## BACKGROUND

The wastewater system in the old Auckland suburbs (comprising most of the isthmus areas and parts of Blockhouse Bay) was based on a Victorian/Edwardian English design. It is a network carrying wastewater as well as stormwater during rain (dual network).

Overflow points are an integral/essential part of this system. Overflows occur when rain induced stormwater overloads the system. Watercare advises that these overflows are common (happening more than 50 times annually) through the 41 overflow points on the Auckland isthmus<sup>3</sup>.

Overflows are a very significant potential health risk. We draw Council attention to the late 1940's when the Auckland sewage treatment plant was situated at Orakei (now Kelly Tarltons) with an outflow further into the Waitemata harbour. Many beaches had to be closed because the outfall from the sewage plant was considered one of the vectors of the polio epidemic<sup>4</sup>. At the time of construction designers had suggested the outfall was far enough away for the normal tidal flushing to safely carry any effluent away.

As a result of the newly perceived deficiencies at the Orakei plant, Auckland set up the Mangere wastewater treatment facility.

In 1989 planning began on the Central Interceptor to cope with Auckland growth. Later the Auckland City Council embarked on a project to separate the wastewater from stormwater. This was on a street by street separation program (to make it affordable) over a number of years. Thus eventually the dual network could be separated into a wastewater network for treatment at Mangere and a separate stormwater network. It is noteworthy that many households in the western bays of Auckland (if not throughout Auckland) who have undertaken development requiring a resource consent since the 1980s have been required to separate stormwater from sewage at their own cost, out to the road. This created a reasonable expectation that the separation programme would be completed.

We understand that stormwater can be treated on a suburban level (ie it does not need a central facility such as Mangere).

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<sup>2</sup> A similar debate occurred in the late 1940s and 1950s before the Mangere treatment station was built.

<sup>3</sup> The overflow points are situated in Cox's Bay, Cox's Creek, Edgars Creek, Herne Bay, Home Bay, Kelmarna Stream, Lower Meola Creek, Lower Tamaki River, Meola Stream, Motions Creek, Motions Creek Estuary, Newmarket Stream, Oakley Creek (Oakley Creek Walkway), Omaru Creek, Orakei Creek, Small tributary of Whau Creek, St Heliers Bay, Upper Motions Creek, Waitemata Harbour – CBD edge, Waterview inlet (Saltaire St), Waterview inlet (Seaside Ave), Whau Creek. (Some watercourses have multiple outlets).

<sup>4</sup> John R Fitzmaurice, " *History of Auckland Wastewater and Mangere Wastewater Treatment Plant* ", paper presented to 3rd Australasian Engineering Heritage Conference 2009

The Central Interceptor project has had many starting dates, none of which has been met.

**We note that current best practice is for a separated system.**

## **BACKGROUND TO AUCKLAND COUNCIL'S PRESENT APPROACH**

After amalgamation we understand the new Supercity Auckland Council ceased the annual street by street separation project<sup>5</sup>.

More recently, from a reported comment of a council manager<sup>6</sup>, advice from Watercare<sup>7</sup>, and conversations with Auckland Council employees, we understand the separation project has been abandoned.

The (10 year) Long term Plan of 2012 provided for the total expenditure on the Central Interceptor, suggesting completion by 2022. The 10 year plan update in 2015 allocated \$966 million, the full cost of the project, indicating that it was to be completed by 2025. A number of subsequent start dates have not been met. The project is now slated to start in 2019 with a completion date<sup>8</sup> of 2026.

During the Auckland Council tenure the overflows have persisted. The effects range from regular pollution-driven beach closures in western and some eastern bays to **permanent Auckland Council warnings** against bathing and shellfish collection in more highly polluted areas such as Cox's Bay and Meola Reef. It is significant that there is no animal life observable in Cox's Creek.

Recent testing in the Kelmarna Stream showed a reading of 190,000 cfu/100ml. The "swimmable" level is 540. The Kelmarna Stream is a tributary of Cox's Creek which discharges into Cox's Bay.

The overflows are in high public use areas. Westhaven marina (where Auckland Council is currently undertaking short and medium term work to reduce the effect of the overflows) is clearly a high use area. Cox's Bay, which has a number of permanent boat moorings as well as the Herne Bay sea scouts facility and a canoe club rooms, is also used regularly. Okahu Bay has a number of boating facilities and moorings. It is inevitable that users of these facilities will come into contact with discharged excrement.

We believe that annual overflows into the harbour now amount to 2.2 million cu m.

There is no current cogent wastewater/stormwater plan. The Healthy Waters arm of Auckland Council no longer favours separation and has ceased (or seriously curtailed) the annual quota for wastewater/stormwater separation. In conjunction with more delays to the Central Interceptor project (it has so far been 28 years in the planning) there is a policy vacuum and paralysis. Instead of a cogent plan, there now is a piecemeal/reactive type response to individual local issues (eg a stormwater holding tank to receive discharges into St Mary's Bay/Westhaven marina).

Mayor Phil Goff has ordered a review/option report inter alia of water, wastewater and stormwater services to be completed by September.

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<sup>5</sup> Comment by CEO, Watercare in meeting 10 March 2017

<sup>6</sup> The NZ Herald, 21 January 2017

<sup>7</sup> See note 5 above

<sup>8</sup> According to Mayor Phil Goff, as quoted in the Herald

## **CENTRAL INTERCEPTOR**

The Central Interceptor is a crucial project to upgrade Auckland's wastewater network. It consists of a 4.5m diameter pipe running from Western Springs to the Mangere treatment plant. [Its] main function is to increase the capacity of the system. Further expenditure will be required for linkages to the existing system.

The Central Interceptor will not eliminate sewage overflows. It will reduce overflows in some parts of the system. Watercare advises further overflow reductions will occur once a Waterfront Interceptor is connected linking the western seaside suburbs to the Central Interceptor. [However] We understand that Auckland Council does not intend to start this Waterfront Interceptor until the Central Interceptor is complete. Moreover, it is our understanding that even the addition of this major structural component will not eliminate overflows.

**Watercare advises that separation is the only way to eliminate sewage overflows.**

## **SEWAGE DISCHARGE VOLUMES**

There are rigorous requirements in the combined pipe areas for new developments/extensive renovations to hold back stormwater in holding tanks so that overflow volumes stabilise. Watercare advises that this is ineffective for sewage. That is because it is not possible to store wastewater, which will continue to flow into the network. So while the overflow volumes may not change, extra sewage produced by intensification will still be discharged – all that happens is the concentration (or amount) of sewage in the overflows will increase.

## **LEGAL ISSUES**

The Local Government Act requires Councils to have comprehensive infrastructure plans.

If Auckland Council has abandoned the separation policy of the past then it must have a replacement plan.

Any new stormwater or wastewater plan must comply with applicable law. Particularly important are inter alia the Resource Management Act 1991 and the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000.

## **AUCKLAND COUNCIL WATER REVIEW**

If the outcome of the Phil Goff water review is to persist with the abandonment of the separation policy then any new plan must comply with inter alia the following provisions of the Hauraki Gulf Marine Parks Act<sup>9</sup>:

"To recognise the national significance of the Hauraki Gulf, its islands, and catchments, the objectives of the management of the Hauraki Gulf, its islands, and catchments are-

- (a) the protection and, where appropriate, the enhancement of the life-supporting capacity of the environment of the Hauraki Gulf, its islands, and catchments:

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<sup>9</sup> Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000, s 8

- (c) the protection and, where appropriate, the enhancement of the natural, historic, and physical resources (including kaimoana) of the Hauraki Gulf, its islands, and catchments with which the tangata whenua have an historic, traditional, cultural, and spiritual relationship:  
....
- (f) the maintenance and, where appropriate, the enhancement of the natural, historic, and physical resources of the Hauraki Gulf , its islands, and catchments, which contribute to the recreation and enjoyment of the Hauraki Gulf for the people and communities of the Hauraki Gulf and New Zealand."

These objectives are incompatible with sewage overflows into the Waitemata Harbour, Hauraki Gulf or any watercourse discharging to the Harbour or Gulf.

The Resource Management Act 1991 also applies, including:

"No person may, in the coastal marine area, -

...

- (d) deposit in, on, or under any foreshore or seabed any substance in a manner that has or is likely to have adverse effect on the foreshore or seabed"<sup>10</sup>

This objective and other (RMA) objectives are incompatible with untreated sewage discharges into the Waitemata Harbour and the Hauraki Gulf.

## **SUBMISSION**

We invite Auckland Council to endorse and act on the following:

1. Provide funding for the Mayor Goff's water review and completion of all planning matters so that the interceptor programme (both the central and the waterfront interceptors) can be commenced and completed on time.
2. Allow public participation in the fact-finding stage of the review, including funding of independent experts.
3. If the water report results in a recommendation for no change to current policy on separation (ie not to pursue separation), have the recommendation peer reviewed by leading overseas experts conversant with New Zealand law and on the basis of best practice.
4. Make the reviews/reports public.
5. Give the future action required to solve the overflows issue the priority (including funding) and oversight by the governing body of councillors that this important matter deserves (in particular to ensure that any further delays will be avoided).

David Abbott/Dirk Hudig  
(on behalf of the Stop Auckland Sewage Overflows Coalition)

27 March 2017

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<sup>10</sup> Resource Management Act 1991, s 12