

Dear SASOC members

We start this report with an apology for our silence since February. You may recall we said then that we were looking at incorporating SASOC (under the Incorporated Societies Act). Regrettably a combination of work on two major resource consents, other commitments and winter illnesses have cut into our time and productivity. However, a lot has been happening.

A snapshot of the past 6 months

- Auckland's urban water quality is now a recognised issue
- Water groups are increasingly active
- It remains vitally important that expenditure be protected
- The importance of community consultation is being recognised
- A regional stormwater network discharge consent is almost in place
- The western isthmus project is firing up
- The St Mary's Bay project – the first large local project – is on its way
- A water regulator is on the horizon

Auckland urban water quality – now a recognised issue

It is gratifying to see Mayor Phil Goff saying that improving our water quality is a priority for him. We believe there is across-the-board support for this. The challenge will be to get explicit support from all our local politicians in the upcoming elections.

The Auckland Council Safeswim programme introduced last year has shown that the water quality issue is not confined to the old combined sewer network in the old Auckland inner city suburbs – where any rain causes serious contaminated overflows. High human faecal pollution has been found in stormwater discharges to the Waitemata and Manukau Harbours in areas with separated stormwater and wastewater systems.

It is an accepted fact that wastewater is infiltrating the stormwater network through broken pipes (often caused by ground movement) and entering it directly through incorrect connections. Both Auckland Council's stormwater division, Healthy Waters, and its CCO, Watercare Services Limited need "a better handle" on the state of their existing networks and the accumulated maintenance deficit needing to be addressed. A dedicated and adequately funded compliance section within Council is sorely needed. With local body elections on the horizon, now is the time for our communities to say to the incoming politicians "water quality must be given priority".

Community action increasing

It is encouraging to see the increasing level of community involvement in water quality issues. The work of Te Wai-o-Pareira River Care Group, first in engaging with Healthy Waters and Watercare to get broken infrastructure repaired, and then marshalling its community to clean up the Henderson Creek, has been a tremendous model. We are also aware of similar groups emerging in Meadowbank/St Johns and the Pourewa Valley, and in Newmarket, to add to the ongoing work of groups in Mt Albert and Carrington catchments, as well as our own Herne Bay and St Mary' Bay catchments. We are also aware of the excellent work that has been done for years by long-standing groups fringing the Manukau Harbour. We remain convinced that there is a need to share knowledge and ideas – and that SASOC has a valuable role to play in bringing existing and prospective members together.

Continuing commitment of expenditure

We recently attended a presentation (by Auckland Council) on the history of Auckland's water infrastructure. We were told that the need for a separated stormwater and wastewater in the Meola Creek catchment (part of Sandringham/Mt Albert Auckland) was identified in 1917. However, because no significant progress has been made in the ensuing century, in excess of 1 million cu meters of sewage/stormwater mix is now discharged annually into the creek and Waitemata Harbour, just from this source.

More recently, although NZ local authorities budgeted \$4.8 billion for expenditure on water infrastructure in the 2016/17 year, the actual spend was only \$3.8 billion (source: Water NZ). The "missing" \$1 billion was reprioritised to other (Council projects) spending. The expenditure gap continues. The effect is an increasing maintenance/upgrade deficit, which will continue unless end-of-life assets are replaced and repairs/infrastructure improvements are undertaken incrementally, as required. If this is done properly, it will be affordable. A failure to do this will mean that Councils find the infrastructure funding increasingly onerous/unaffordable. The consequence, as we have been seeing, will be unacceptable environmental outcomes and health risks, as outdated infrastructure fails to deliver.

Auckland is the classic case of this phenomenon - its water infrastructure upgrade deficit amounts to billions of dollars. SASOC believes that it is vital that Auckland Council continue to ring-fence its water budgets via a **targeted rate**. Again, now is the time to get returning or aspiring local politicians to commit to this approach.

Community consultation – another must

Those of you who attended the AGM will remember the lengthy discussion about experiences of consultation on water issues. The view of the meeting was that it has been poor: lack of transparency, selective disclosure, failure to follow through with promised transparent conduct etc.

Inadequate consultation can have a big effect on relations between Council and communities – and can lead to adversarial positions being taken on projects that would have better outcomes if information was communicated freely and clearly at the outset, and community wishes taken into account. You will probably all have a story to tell on this point.

We are hoping that one of the major ongoing projects, the Western Isthmus Project (WIP) for upgrade of stormwater and wastewater infrastructure in Auckland's western isthmus, will prove the value of good consultation. SASOC is part of a community liaison group for this project, which has been set up with formal rules for consultation. We will be delighted to share them, and ideas arising from that experience, with members. Let us know if you want to know more.

Auckland regional stormwater network discharge consent

In February, independent hearing commissioners granted Auckland Council the regional stormwater discharge consent it sought last year. This consent permits Council to discharge stormwater from existing and future (yet to be built) outfalls for the next 35 years. The consent provides for review and, where necessary, re-setting of conditions (to meet best practice) every six years.

SASOC and other community groups filed appeals against the decision. SASOC had two concerns. First, in the six-yearly reviews, Council was required to consult with various organisations such as the Property Council but not with community groups. Secondly, the conditions did not include regular measurement of discharges against a set baseline for level of pollutants, which SASOC feels is necessary to assess the adequacy of remedial action.

A mediation has just concluded. Although we have still to see the final version of the conditions, which will then need to be approved by the court, SASOC has been included in the parties to be consulted, and we believe that an acceptable compromise has been found for the concern over measurement standards.

We will advise the results in due course. We believe we are making some headway with the issues.

Western isthmus project

To recap, the Western Isthmus Project is expected to reduce the combined sewer overflows in the area to two per annum from 10 outfalls (from over 100+ overflows from some 40 major outfalls). A major part of the project is construction of the 4.5m diameter tunnel known as the Central Interceptor. In the short term it will convey a mix of stormwater/wastewater from combined sewer system to the Mangere Treatment Plant. In the longer term it will be used for wastewater only - a new stormwater drainage system is to be developed. The cost of the Project is budgeted at \$1.825 billion over the period 2018-2028, with Council (Healthy Waters) to provide \$325 million (for integral stormwater infrastructure) and Watercare \$1.5 billion. Very significant further work will be required, beyond 2028.

The overall western isthmus catchment is being divided into contiguous sub-catchments, each of which will be assessed with an individual stormwater management plan. (The sort of matters to consider is whether it is practical to collect the stormwater for transmission to a harbour outfall or drain this into an existing aquifer). The large number of sub-catchments means it will take some time to develop a strategy for the entire project.

A community liaison groups has been established as part of consultation through the term of the project. SASOC has led the establishment of formal rules which include appointment of an independent chairperson and formal minutes. The rules have been agreed between the participating community groups (which, as well as SASOC, include groups from the Meola and Cox's Creek catchment areas), Auckland Council, and Watercare. So far there have been four consultation meetings.

One of the early decisions to be made was that the Herne Bay (seaside) and St Marys Bay catchments are to be separated. This decision was based on stormwater drainage to the Waitemata Harbour being easily achieved. Assessment of other sub-catchments is continuing.

Separation outside the Western Isthmus Project

We are aware that separation is being undertaken in a number of diverse areas outside the Western Isthmus. Many of these places have pockets of unseparated sewers after partial separation was undertaken in the past. These include parts of Pt Chevalier, Waterview, Parnell, Orakei, Remuera, Newmarket, Mission Bay, and St Johns. Some \$80 million has been allocated over the 10 year period from 2018 for this work.

When the funding was originally allocated in Council's 2018 Long Term Plan (LTP) it was based on estimates - there was no specific budget nor a timetable for the expenditure. We would expect there to be some sort of budget and timetable by now. This is important because it will show whether or not further funding will be necessary in the next LPT - due for consideration in 2021. It will also provide local community groups with transparency for separation projects in their respective areas.

We will be taking this up with Watercare and Healthy Waters. Community groups also should keep the pressure on their Local Board and Councillor(s) requesting specific local plans and timetables.

Please let us know if you are having difficulty getting information from Council or feel you are being fobbed off. We will do whatever we can to support you, whether by sharing ideas or using our contacts within Council or Watercare to advocate for you.

The St Mary's Bay project

This controversial project was conceived as an upgrade to the combined sewer system. The plan was to capture and hold overflows of mixed wastewater/stormwater in a large (1.8m) tunnel, prior to pumping this back into the existing trunk sewer when capacity allowed, for transmission to Mangere for treatment. The tunnel was to be drilled under houses along the St Mary's cliff, and to be designed to discharge into the Waitemata Harbour via a new outfall close to the Harbour Bridge if it filled too fast for the pump-back. The project was presented to the community on the basis that there would be far fewer overflows to the harbour (20-25 rather than 100 per year), and any overflows would be quickly relatively diluted and readily dispersed by tidal flows. The proposal was to pick up all flows from the existing combined sewer system in St Marys Bay and eastern Herne Bay.

The local community took issue with a number of matters – why continue to put sewage into the harbour, why not separate stormwater from wastewater instead, why drill under a geologically unstable cliff? Resource consent was granted by independent commissioners, notwithstanding this opposition, and the local residents' associations and others appealed to the Environment Court. Whilst that appeal was pending, Council (Healthy Waters and Watercare) made the decision to separate the two harbourside catchments, but to keep the tunnel for stormwater only.

After further negotiations, the community engaged a very experienced expert to review the need for the tunnel solely for stormwater. The expert has identified a number of shortcomings and inconsistencies in the Council plan and made recommendations to address them. The parties are close to reaching agreement to implement those recommendations.

Perhaps the biggest point to come out of this process is that more effective consultation from the outset would almost certainly have delivered this or a better outcome faster and for less cost.

A water regulator

SASOC has always believed the ongoing and New Zealand-wide water infrastructure issues will only resolve by the appointment of a water regulator with coercive powers. Australia, Canada, UK and USA have all made important progress in reducing pollution from water discharges but only after a regulator was appointed.

Very recently the Government announced it intends to legislate on water quality. The core of the policy will be to have a regulator for potable water (drinking water from the tap), wastewater and stormwater. The intent is to introduce legislation this year. SASOC is delighted with this decision and will make submissions on the legislation when it is open for public comment. Our aim will be to ensure the regulator will have sufficient powers to enforce the improvements required.

Incorporation/change of name/AGM

We remain strongly of the view that SASOC needs a formal structure to make real progress, and may be helped by a change of name. Here is what we said in our report in February:

“We spoke to members at the AGM about the value of incorporation – see the AGM minutes. The need for it has been exemplified by the comments of Council’s planning officers in their final report on the stormwater NDC application: one of the factors in their recommendation not to include community organisations in the stakeholders to be consulted ahead of the review or to establish a community liaison group was the diversity of existing groups and the lack of any “umbrella” organisation. Whilst incorporation will not answer that point entirely, we see it as the first important step to give us a clear voice and, hopefully, to build in other groups with similar purposes.

We have attached the simple form that we need members to sign. **We ask that each of you let us know as soon as possible, but in any event by 25 February, whether your organisation is willing to sign the application for incorporation.**

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The advice from Water NZ is that we need to do more about getting our message out to the public. Debra Harrington recommended as part of a public relations initiative that we look at changing our name to one that will have more specific meaning e.g. Clean up our waters (she thought the acronym SASOC needed too much explanation, and the full name was too unwieldy).

We ask that you let us have your views on this – if there is support for change we will come back to you calling for suggestions and a process for putting a change in place. However, our view is that we do not want to hold up incorporation for this – and for continuity reasons it may be better to incorporate as Stop Auckland Sewage Overflows Coalition and then change.”

We suggest that we use our AGM to discuss and hopefully put this into place. We will get notice of the AGM out to you in mid-October, for a November meeting date. In the meantime we welcome any feedback that you have.

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