

# A New Town Centre for Christchurch NZ : The Use of Statutory Planning Instruments to Facilitate Urban Design and Sustainability Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how urban design and sustainability outcomes can be facilitated through the application of suitable statutory planning methods under a district plan-led regulatory environment.

Haines Planning and Altoon & Porter (Amsterdam) have been working with a team of Christchurch based consultants to formulate plans for a new town centre (the Styx Centre) in the north of Christchurch. The objective has been to create a new town centre, the like of which has yet to be seen in NZ. Promoted by Jonmer Projects and AMP, experienced retail centre developers and owners, the focus has been on identifying urban design and sustainability outcomes befitting a 21<sup>st</sup> century town centre to be established on a greenfields site.

The Styx Centre is designed to serve the needs for four suburban communities whose settlement pattern is currently fragmented. The four communities of Belfast, Northwood, Redwood and Styx Mill are located with a 2km radius of the proposed new town centre and form part of Christchurch's northern growth corridor.

The centre adjoins an existing retail shopping centre and accords with the centres-based planning framework on which the Christchurch City District Plan is based. The site is bounded by a main arterial road (State Highway 74), the main trunk rail line and the Styx River, an attractive waterway whose protection and enhancement features in the proposals for the town centre.

The project is being progressed as a privately requested change to the Christchurch District Plan. The Plan Change departs from the generally permissive zoning provisions which apply to existing town centres by prescribing certain minimum requirements that will facilitate delivery of highly desirable urban design and sustainability outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Town Centre, Urban Design, Sustainability, Outcome-focussed planning.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is the nature of planning systems in developed western democracies to regulate land use through a plan-led system, where the "detail" of planning is provided in a local (or district) plan. A planning technique which is commonly employed in local plans is zoning, which

broadly allocates congruous land uses activities within zones that carry names such as residential, commercial, industrial, recreation etc.

Planners know that zoning has limitations. It is a passive technique; it permits certain activities to occur while controlling other activities and requiring them to be the subject of a development application. Zoning, in itself can not necessarily deliver the sustainability and urban design outcomes that modern society is now seeking.

This is the context within which the new Styx Town Centre project in northern Christchurch has been approached. The proposed town centre could not be the subject of a development application as the site is currently zoned rural and the proposal is to take it straight to its highest and best land use, being retail and related uses. The only option available has been to seek a re-zoning for business purposes.

Under New Zealand's principal land use statute (the Resource Management Act 1991), re-zoning of land can be either Council-led, or be subject to a private plan change request. At the time the developer of the Styx Centre (Jonmer Projects) commenced its planning, the city council was embroiled in its own city-wide retail re-zoning exercise (known as Variation 86), and did not have the resources, nor was it ready, to promote a re-zoning for a new town centre.

A private plan change request was the only credible option to pursue. It became known as Plan Change 22 (PC 22). In this case, the request was assisted by its comfortable fit with Variation 86 which supported centres-based planning and was at a relatively advanced stage in becoming an operative part of the City Plan.

The brief from the developer to the project team was to work collaboratively with the Council to formulate a plan change that could "direct" urban design and sustainability outcomes in a manner that would address the limitations inherent in the zoning technique.

## **2. THE PLANNING CONTEXT : STYX TOWN CENTRE**

The Styx Centre site comprises 9.2ha and is essentially a greenfields site. Key features of the site are its "gateway" location, its long frontage to an arterial road (SH74), the main trunk railway along its eastern boundary and the Styx River corridor defining its southern edge.

It is located adjacent to an established shopping centre, known as the Northwood Supa Centa, which has developed around a retail park design typology, and comprises 7.5ha. In combination, the two sites will work together, the northern one housing large format retail activities and flanking the finer grained retail and other activities proposed for the new town centre.

The term "town centre" has been key in the planning of this project, as the intention of the developer is not to create just another shopping centre. It is to be a town centre with a mix of retail, commercial offices and community activities; a pedestrian friendly environment and accessible during day and night.

This vision for the Styx Centre has been assisted by AMP, which owns the adjacent Supa Centa site and has a joint venture relationship with the developer to acquire the Styx Centre

site on its completion. The only other comparable example of such a centre is the Botany Town Centre in Auckland, an AMP developed and owned centre comprising a mixture of open-air high streets, arcades and an enclosed pavilion. AMP also facilitated the conceptualisation of the Styx Centre project by engaging Altoon & Porter (Amsterdam) to undertake the masterplanning of the site.

The masterplanning approach also provided an opportunity for the developer to test the viability and deliverability of the project. It allowed the developer and project team to engage at the earliest possible opportunity with a wide range of community groups and stakeholders. During the project formulation stage of the re-zoning, community based workshops were held as well as numerous one-on-one meeting with other stakeholders, including the Council and the highway authority.

### **3. STRATEGIC FIT**

The Styx Centre has an excellent strategic fit at the regional level. This was recognised in the Christchurch Urban Development Strategy, which was subsequently given legal effect through Change 1 to the Regional Policy Statement (RPS). The RPS is an important document in the two-tier planning system which operates in New Zealand, as all second-tier district plans are legally required to give effect to the RPS. The project team has therefore engaged concurrently in the separate regional policy work-stream to ensure the necessary alignment is achieved.

This has been important in terms of securing higher order sustainability and urban design objectives. Owing to the strategic location of the Styx Centre, which is centrally located between the four currently fragmented communities of Belfast, Northwood, Redwood Springs and Styx Mill, it is important that it is formally recognised as a “Key Activity Centre” (KAC) in the RPS. By so doing, the Styx Centre will be recognised as a centre whose role is to provide for the full range of retail, commercial, community and leisure activities. That has implications in terms of reduced travel for existing and future residents of the city’s officially designated “northern growth corridor”. It also has urban design implications in terms of allowing a vibrant centre to establish, with a range of public spaces, a north-south main street and accessibility to the amenity of the Styx River corridor.

Without KAC status, it is possible that only a smaller centre could develop, resulting in a lost opportunity and an emasculated “centre”. With KAC status, the Styx Centre will give credence to the northern growth corridor’s key role within the regional context.

Proposed Change 1 to the RPS has introduced new urban limits for Christchurch and has identified four new growth areas, which will be developed in three tranches from now until 2041. The strategic fit of the Styx Centre becomes immediately obvious by reference to the plan taken from the RPS, which has been overlain with 2 km radius circles. The plan shows the northern growth corridor extending northwards from the edge of the currently northernmost “KAC” in Christchurch, this being the Northlands-Papanui Centre. Imagine that plan without the Styx Centre circle shown and it becomes clear how important the Styx Centre is to meet the foreseeable needs of the existing and future residents within the growth corridor.

#### 4. PLAN CHANGE FORMULATON

At the District Plan level, the proposed plan change for the Styx Centre needed to be informed by a range of environmental and related considerations. These included the following:

- Retail Analysis
- Traffic and Transportation
- Hydrology and engineering
- Noise
- Ecology
- Urban design
- Landscape / visual, and
- Social Well-being

The plan change also needed to be informed by the masterplanning exercise which had been completed for the site, by incorporating the fundamental features of the site's layout, these being:

- the north-south main street
- integration with the existing road network and the adjacent Supa Centa
- creating community linkages
- enhancing and utilising the amenity of the Styx River corridor as a design feature
- retaining the legacy of the land (with its history of horticultural land uses).
- underground carparking (70% of proposed demand) to enable a more attractive at-grade environment and create additional development opportunities
- variable maximum heights and set backs to create visual interest and give the new centre its own identity.
- stormwater management proposals, including hydrological neutrality, water quality treatment, re-use of rainwater, and provision of rain gardens.

Ideally, it would have been good if the project team could have utilised an off-the-shelf zone from the District Plan. Regrettably, that was not possible, with the closest zone available being the Business 2 (District Centre) zoning. While it was possible to adopt some of the provisions of the Business 2 zone (relating to density, set backs, landscaping, screening and tree planting requirements), there were a range of areas where it does not address

sustainability and urban design requirements. The Business 2 zone that applies to existing centres that have established over time; it was not well suited to the establishment of a new centre on a greenfields site, held in single ownership and capable of being comprehensively planned and designed.

In recognition of the site's very attractive attributes and the developer's aspirations to establish a mixed use town centre (informed by a masterplanning study), the new zone for the Styx Centre incorporated site specific rules and assessment criteria.

By definition, a plan change can only set in place the parameters within which future development application(s) will be considered by the consent authority. In other words, it seeks to establish in principle acceptance of the District Centre proposal, leaving the issue of detailed design to be addressed at a later stage through the development application process. The way this had been developed for the Styx Centre gives the Council decision making discretion which is restricted to the layout of buildings and car parks, the design and appearance of buildings, landscaping and internal vehicle and pedestrian access and circulation.

This two step process is important as there was a tendency on the part of some involved in the process to seek more detailed information than is appropriate for a zoning request. As it is, PC 22 stands in stark contrast to the other open-ended Business 2 zone provisions of the Christchurch City Plan, by proposing a range of voluntarily self-imposed environmental controls and urban design requirements.

This was achieved in PC 22 by identifying particular rules, which apply only to the Styx Centre, and by reinforcing those through a Special Provision Plan (which is a conceptual plan) against which future development applications are "encouraged" to measure up.

In its amended form, the plan change effectively "directs" future development to include the following design features.

- a) Site accesses will be located in the positions shown on the Special Provision Plan.
- b) The Styx River riparian setback will be planted with native species, with a landscape planting and management plan to accompany the resource consent application for building development. Implementation of planting must occur prior to retail activity commencing on the site.
- c) A minimum of 1200m<sup>2</sup> must be made available as external public space, with one such space capable of containing a circle with a minimum diameter of 18 metres.
- d) A minimum width landscape strip and building setbacks shall be provided along the site boundaries, including retention of the existing shelter belts.
- e) Colour controls are imposed on walls and roofs facing the eastern boundary, which lies adjacent to a future residential growth area.
- f) Any underground parking shall be located only within the indicative area shown in the Special Provision Plan.

- g) Community linkages shall be provided within the site in the indicative locations shown.
- h) A north-south main street shall be provided.
- i) Special controls apply to building development adjacent to the River Styx (Areas A & B), relating to height, signage, building colour, reflectivity and floor area.
- j) Residential activities are permitted in the zone and a traffic generation cap will apply until the new Northern Arterial Route relief road is operational.

An additional requirement is that the future development application(s) shall be accompanied by an independent urban design and landscape assessment. And, finally, there is a rule requiring that a minimum 1600m<sup>2</sup> gross floor area of community facilities, in a publicly accessible location within the centre. For the avoidance of doubt PC 22 defines “community facilities”.

Particular attention has also been given to height controls over different parts of the centre. The importance of corner buildings and variable building heights has been recognised in PC 22 so that the Styx Centre can be visually interesting and able to develop its own identity. Over the more sensitive parts of the site, building heights range from 5m to 12m. The majority of the site is subject to a 16m height control, with a 20m maximum adjacent to the crossroads intersection at the north-western corner of the site.

PC 22 now provides a prescriptive framework within which the Styx Centre project can move forward. It does this by offering a range of controls over matters that are of public interest and benefit, while balancing the commercial requirements of both the developer and future occupants of the centre. This has only been made possible by the developer’s willingness to adopt a masterplanning approach to the project and allowing that to inform the plan change documentation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through the private plan change mechanism, the developer has proposed a range of self imposed provisions that a Council-led plan change could not include without extensive consultation with affected landowners, and some assurance of a net zoning “up-side” at the end of such a plan change process.

Implicit in this paper is the recognition that the planning system is only one of the several determinants that influence land use outcomes. Because the planning system can only **enable** particular land uses to establish, it behoves consent authorities to be responsive to the other determinants which affect the delivery of particular land uses and quality outcomes. Other determinants include land tenure arrangements, land economics, accessibility and locational factors, these being particularly relevant to the decision making of landowners / developers.

In this case, the owner of the site is an experienced shopping centre developer, working in conjunction with AMP, an experienced owner and manager of shopping and town centres. The owner has assembled several parcels of land to create a single landholding and the opportunity for development of the site to be comprehensively planned.

As a gateway site to Christchurch's northern growth corridor, the proposed Styx Centre is highly accessible. Its central location relative to the four currently fragmented suburbs, which surround the site, allows it to provide a commercial and community focal point, and have a unifying effect for the communities concerned. Rarely, do such land use determinants coincide in such a favourable manner as they do for the Styx Centre.

In order for the planning system to respond to the ideal geographical, land ownership and accessibility characteristics of the site, the private plan change request mechanism has proven to be the best option to pursue. Because the existing zoning provisions of the District Plan are too broad to facilitate a "new build" town centre, it has been necessary to write a more prescriptive plan change, thereby incorporating the present day urban design and environmental imperatives which influence on planning endeavours now more than ever before.

In summary PC 22 demonstrates that when a masterplanning approach to development is adopted, it is possible to achieve the necessary balance between the prescription of public "goods" and the flexibility needed for the developer to respond to changing market needs as the project is rolled out.