SASOC submission to Environment Committee on build of the Long Term Plan

Rebuilding our drainage infrastructure – planning for the long term

1. The common aim:

Water quality - in our streams and harbours - that Auckland and New Zealand can be proud of.

2. **The history of the need** (with apologies for repetition to those who know the history well):

2.1 As a snapshot of failures (by way of example):

- Cox's creek
- Meola stream
- New Lynn
- Hobson Bay
- Takapuna Beach
- Wairau estuary

2.2 We believe that it is an accepted fact that there has been a historical lack of clear, consistent, long-term policy and planning – Auckland-wide – for our stormwater and wastewater infrastructure with:

- differing approaches and issues in Auckland's legacy cities pre-2010 (Auckland City) but universally, stormwater has mixed with wastewater either by design or by accident (designed overflows from combined sewers; unintended infiltration and ingress from one system to the other even when systems are separated; illegal private property connections);
- little or no apparent awareness of the inter-relationship between stormwater and wastewater in terms of the effect on water quality – resulting in overflow of contaminated water into stream and harbours; and
- even after the formation of Auckland City, there is little evidence of integrated planning to address this, until very recently:
  - Separation of combined system has been a stop/go affair;
  - Little or no apparent planning for upgrade based on end of life projections;
  - Maintenance has been largely a reactive rather than a proactive process.

2.3 Again until very recently, there has been a history of underinvestment, particularly for stormwater:

- $105M p.a. stormwater spend last year of legacy Councils (10 years ago).
- History has shown legacy Council spend was inadequate to maintain acceptable condition of stormwater infrastructure.

- Until recent years Auckland Council budgeted spend was lower than $105M p.a.
- $130M p.a. approximate budgeted spend in recent years.
- Emergency budget spend reduced to $90M p.a.

3. The 2018 watershed

3.1 Planning for the 2018 LTP brought the first real attempt to catch up in the form of:

- The Western Isthmus a start to detailed long-term planning for stormwater in central Auckland supported by committed funding;
- Council (Healthy Waters) and Watercare working together to upgrade the combined system in the Western Isthmus (largely by separation);
- an increased focus within both organisations on causes of mixing of stormwater and wastewater in 'separated' infrastructure outside the combined system;
- a clear programme to upgrade and maintain stormwater infrastructure; and
- introduction of the targeted rate to fund that programme.

3.2 This was in addition to a reasonable general budget for maintenance and upgrade (across Auckland).

3.3 Planning has since begun for extension of the Western Isthmus programme to the Eastern Isthmus.

4. Impact of budgetary restraints (Covid)

4.1 The emergency budget makes significant changes to the planning for stormwater upgrades and maintenance. Critical changes are the decisions to remove funding for:

- re-lining existing pipes; and
- replacing end of life infrastructure until it collapses or is on the verge of collapse (altering the risk response).

4.2 Both these changes exemplify a return to 'reactive' expenditure – i.e. only when there is a critical need - which is unpredictable both in terms of adverse effects and cost e.g. New Lynn.

4.3 Continuing budget constraints, or a failure to provide for early catch up, will raise the prospect of increased financial pressure when an unpredicted failure occurs (which must remain a real risk whilst funding for infrastructure replacement and maintenance remains below the level required for sustainable upgrade).

4.4 The problem worsens the longer budget restrictions continue. The greater the delay in catching up this year's retrenchment, and any scaling back of future budgets by adoption of a higher risk profile (should that be contemplated as a means to limit expenditure),

put Auckland at risk of a return to the past of under-investment and the disastrous effects of that under-investment on our urban water quality.

5. **What is needed for the future** – an outcomes-focused policy and a funded plan:

5.1 A policy is needed to establish a stormwater plan that:

- sets appropriate standards for water quality (e.g. swimability);
- sets a timeframe for achieving that standard;
- sets a budget to achieve that standard within a set time frame;
- prioritises expenditure on drainage infrastructure within Council's general budget and protects it by a targeted rate.

5.2 The plan must be sustainable, which means that it must:

- be based on a detailed schedule of infrastructure asset, setting out life expectancy, a programme for upgrade and an estimate of cost;
- build infrastructure that meets Council's Climate Plan (it seems to be accepted science that stormwater infrastructure will need to cope with increased volumes of rainfall); and
- be integrated with Watercare's wastewater plan.

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