

Subject: OTOROHANGA STOPBANK PATHWAY

To: Otorohanga Community Board Chairperson and Members

From: Land Management Officer

Date: 4 October 2018

Relevant Community Outcomes

- Otorohanga District is a safe place to live
 - Ensure services and facilities meet the needs of the community
 - Provide for the unique history and culture of the District
 - Promote the local economy and opportunities for economic development
 - Manage the natural and physical environment in a sustainable manner
 - Foster an involved and engaged community
 - Recognise the importance of the District's rural character
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Executive Summary

Having finished the consultation process with members of the community and key stakeholders around the pathway design and the management of the surrounding river control areas, Council staff are now in a position to recommend to Elected Members on the preferred way forward for this project.

Staff Recommendation

1. That the Board approves for Council to resolve that the flood protection areas on the town side of the river from Phillips Avenue to Waipa Esplanade, including the closed landfill to be retired from grazing, with and Council moving to a grass harvest management arrangement.
2. That Council gives consideration to potential mitigation of the adverse effects of this change of management regime on affected parties, in particular the Otorohanga Sports Club.
3. That approval is given to Council staff to terminate the grazing Licences by giving 3 months' notice and working closely with the current grazing Licencees to transition them from use as considerately as possible.
4. That the Engineering Department proceeds with a process to tender the stopbank pathway construction works based upon the agreed design.

Background

Otorohanga District Council have confirmed in their 2018-2028 Long Term Plan for a 3.5 km long gravel pathway for shared use on the top of the stopbanks along the outer edge of the main Otorohanga urban centre. This pathway will be a significant asset for our community that will be accessible to everyone including the young, the elderly and the less able.

The primary purpose of the pathway is to provide a safe and accessible off road route for all members of our community by connecting main urban, residential and recreational areas

with a 2.5 metre wide shared pathway. This pathway will also offer a safe alternative route for children walking or cycling to school with the pathway connecting Otorohanga Primary School, Otorohanga South School and Otorohanga College, also including footpath connections to St Mary's Catholic School.

We are expecting the pathway to also be used for and encourage recreational opportunities for families living in our District while showcasing our natural environment, cultural art and local history (both Maori and European). Along with this we believe the pathway will add value to our visitor offering by providing another reason to stop and spend time in Otorohanga's main town centre.

Report Discussion

Once the project had been confirmed through the LTP process a project team was established to start the design and investigation work needed before confirming the final design plans.

Council staff presented in a workshop discussion to the Otorohanga Community Board in August and again with Councillors later that month about the pathway proposal outlining different aspects of the project such as key stakeholders, path construction details, risks, opportunities and potential land management options.

In relation to the pathway and the management of the surrounding river control areas the pathway design, construction and subsequent management of the pathway (once completed) had been considered alongside other key factors that also required careful thought, such as;

- Practical management of the pathway and surrounding river control area
- Costs for ongoing maintenance of pathway and river control area
- Impacts on grazing and or harvest revenue
- Environmental and cultural impacts
- Impacts on other users of the river control area – such as grazing licencees, polocrosse club and other community groups
- Impacts on the river control assets including the stopbanks

Out of these considerations three options were presented for discussion;

Option 1 – the existing land use kept at status quo; with the balance land being grazed under the current arrangement. Requiring us to;

- Fence off areas from stock required to build and maintain the pathway, fencing both sides of the path
- Maintain as much grazing area as practicably possible from the balance land
- Provide access points for stock movement across the new path
- Ensure the path is stock proof and stock is secure from public and dogs
- Retire small areas that will no longer be practical or economically viable for grazing

Option 2 – the partial retirement of some areas from grazing; including the stopbanks themselves and the town side of the stopbanks. Requiring us to;

- Only fence along the base of the stopbank on the river side to graze only the river flats
- Provide heavy vehicle access and stock handling facilities to allow efficient movement of stock
- Retire stopbank and town side land from grazing
- Maintain stopbank sidings and retired areas with mowing

Option 3 – move to harvesting grass as an alternative management method; with the river control areas between the river and the town being retired from grazing. Requiring;

- No Fencing
- No stock access (other than for equestrian/community events/activities)
- Less maintenance of the pathway and stopbanks with no need to repair damage caused by stock
- Easier management of multiple uses/users with no stock interference for example events, river access, people walking, dogs exercising, informal recreation, planting projects etc
- Sidlings can be mown by roading contractor at a reasonable rate
- Equivalent net income to Council for redistributing into community projects or grants and maintaining/developing the pathway and other river projects

After a good discussion with the Elected Members and Council staff highlighting the need for a decision on how the surrounding river control areas should be managed before they could proceed further with detailed design, agreement was reached to consult with the community on the pathway design and land management options before making a formal decision on the future land management.

Two public drop-in sessions were held, key stakeholders were spoken with and information and a questionnaire were made available on the Council website with links to it from Council's Facebook page. Council received 23 written submissions and quite a few more discussions were had with stakeholders and members of the community. All but one submitter agreed that fencing the top of the stopbanks wasn't a good idea. The majority of people agreed on option 3 (retiring the whole area and going to grass harvest) with quite a good number still opting for option 2 and having some form of grazing. Most people were eager to see the river control areas used more for community purposes.

None of the fencing costs were included in the options nor were revenue forecasts for grazing versus grass harvest so decisions by submitters were made solely on land use preferences as opposed to financial arguments for or against different options. Had staff highlighted the extra costs of fencing we may have seen some of the supporters of option 2 vote for option 3 (grass harvest and no fences), but a couple of our experienced farmers were very clear about their thoughts on the benefit of stock for weed control and grass compaction but other farmers had contrary views.

A strong theme came through from most parties about more access to the river with designated areas and a more managed approach to the river, balancing all of the different desired activities. This could lead into a separate discussion about managing the various river activities to put some sense behind what we should do where, but it is believed that this should be kept separate to the pathway project whilst acknowledging the linkages between the two. This will also create an opportunity to work closely with iwi, Waikato River Authority, Waikato Regional Council and Rerenoa River Restoration leaders.

Our Design Engineer will be considering feedback about different design aspects suggested by people to enhance the safety features and usability of the pathway while balancing these against other priorities such as protecting the river control assets. He will also be providing feedback to people that have suggested changes to ensure they understand the reasons why these may or may not be included in the final design.

Through our key stakeholder engagement we have identified some parties and or activities that could be significantly affected by whatever land management option may be decided on and staff have outlined these as;

- Otorohanga Sports Club – loss of grazing area and revenue stream for the Club

- Other Grazing Licencee who would lose his grazing area also
- Polocrosse Club - who felt strongly about option 3 being the only option as they have limited space to meet their safety requirements for spectator setbacks from the field (fencing the bottom of the stop bank or the top would almost prevent them from hosting games)
- NZMCA – who have a lease with us and would lose part of their lease area for some of the pathway, although they fully support the pathway for their members
- RDA – felt strongly that more open paddock spaces along the river control areas would allow greater freedom for equestrian activities, especially since this pathway would exclude them from use of it
- Otorohanga Support House – felt strongly about wider community use of the river control areas from a community development perspective and was delighted that the pathway will allow a safe path for less abled people to use
- Otorohanga South School felt that they may be exposed to extra vandalism and we have therefore shifted the proposed connection point. They also felt that parents would need to be worked closely with before considering reviewing some of their current travel plans
- Iwi representatives, some who also represented Rerenoa River Restoration group felt strongly that more access to the river should be made available and are pleased to be included in cultural art, historical story boards and future river planting projects
- NZTA have provided detail about certain safety enhancements they'd like to see considered with the design being modified to include these
- All submitters felt dogs should be kept on leashes on the pathway but most felt we needed more dog exercise and dog swimming areas in some of the less congested areas of river land
- A lot of submitters valued the opportunity to better connect with the river and nature along with using this as an educational resource about water safety and the environment
- Nobody submitted in opposition to the proposal.

Overall the consultation process was very informative and assisted the project team to conclude with a recommendation on the land management of the river control areas along with an enhanced design concept to meet the needs of the community.

Patricia Ambury
Land Management Officer