

ALTERNATIVES TO SMART GROWTH

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BACKGROUND

The arguments about the costs and benefits of Smart Growth have now been well canvassed. Few people involved in urban land use, transport and urban economics can claim to be unaware of conflicting views within this debate. Some of us have been challenging the claimed benefits of “urban intensification” and “control of urban form” for many years. My concerns and warnings were first aired in a report to the Reserve Bank in 1996.

While there is some satisfaction in saying “I told you so” regarding the impact of Smart Growth on house prices and the whole economy, I have to concede that my arguments fell on deaf ears for most of the last ten years. In recent times I have had to ask why Smart Growth carried the day for so long.

I believe our weakness was that we failed to offer attractive and workable alternatives, and in particular, failed to offer alternative forms of growth which were demonstrably superior to Smart Growth. Whenever any of us suggested we should loosen the stranglehold of Metropolitan Urban Limits and abandon pursuit of higher density as an over-arching goal, the counter-argument was always “But then Auckland would sprawl from Hamilton to Whangarei.”

Essentially, Smart Growth was attractive because it seemed to be the only alternative to “urban sprawl” on offer, while “urban sprawl” was held to be so offensive as to be avoided at all costs. Furthermore Smart Growth delivered the benefit of massive increases in property value to those already in the market and able to share the spoils.

This “sprawl to be avoided” is best described as “carpet sprawl” – i.e. urban expansion in which residential areas spread, carpet-like, across the countryside in an endlessly and seamless repeated pattern, without relief or differentiation, and without regard for biodiversity, landscape or natural landforms. In the days of rigorous single-use zoning “carpet sprawl” was dominated by extended areas of single land use – and of single family homes in particular. The image so powerfully burned into many of our minds was of the post-war, baby-boomer suburbs, draped over the landscape from horizon to horizon.

These images were further reinforced by the famous photograph of a lone mother pushing her pushchair endless miles seeking out the nearest shop. “Suburban neuroses” was the epidemic of the day. Many pined for the rural landscapes these “carpet-sprawl” suburbs had so ruthlessly buried under “ticky-tacky boxes” which “all looked just the same”.

We should not be surprised if, when confronted with an apparent and exclusive choice between Smart Growth and Carpet-Sprawl, most people opted for Smart Growth.

My colleagues and I have taken some time to point out “This is not the only choice.”

Furthermore, it took me even longer to realize that the end result of Smart Growth, as it “matures” is actually an even less appealing form of Carpet-Sprawl – the very form of urban growth Smart Growth was meant to prevent.

WHY SMART GROWTH DELIVERS CARPET SPRAWL.

Smart Growth delivers Carpet-Sprawl because even the most rigorous Smart Growth city eventually has to extend its Metropolitan Urban Limit to provide more land for residential, commercial and industrial use.

In recent weeks the Mayors of both Waitakere City and Manukau City have pleaded for extensions to their MULs.

Even Smart Growth planners acknowledge these “adjustments” will be necessary from time to time.

The sequence of events is as follows:

- The MUL is initially set to allow for the next period of growth to take place within the existing “urban form”.
- Eventually this enclosed area fills to the point where there is essentially no zoned land left for further growth or it has become so expensive that no one can afford to use it.
- In the meantime many activities have simply leap-frogged into territory outside the Smart Growth planners’ jurisdiction, which is why Northland Region is now growing so rapidly.
- Open space inside the MUL is sacrificed to high density carpet development to “save” open space outside the MUL.

- At some point the situation becomes intolerable and the people and their representatives demand an extension of the MUL to enclose some piece of surrounding rural land.
- Once this “bulge” is made legal then development and intensification begins again until the new “bulge” is also full of high density carpet development and some relief is allowed in some other part of the city.

Obviously, as this process is repeated the city expands into the rural area as medium or high density “carpet sprawl.” The only difference from the post-war sprawl is that there will be a greater variety of housing types because the market demand is more varied and regulations covering section sizes and housing types have been relaxed since the sixties, and the overall density will be higher.

LOST BIODIVERSITY

In his paper “Home Truths: How Urban Planning is Destroying the Great Australian Dream” delivered in Canberra, 23rd September, 2006, Bob Day AO, Chairman of the *Great Australian Dream Project*, observed:

Now there’s been a lot of publicity lately about bio-diversity and so-called ‘Urban Dead Zones.’ Naturally urban growth or ‘urban sprawl’ as they like to call it, has been blamed for this decrease in bio-diversity. So tell me, which do you think is better for bio-diversity:



This...



this...

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this...



this...



this...



... or this.

The first five scenes are bio-diversity Dead Zones. The last scene, a typical outer suburban street, is a bio-diversity Live Zone.

Now I know a lot of this goes against the grain but it is incumbent on us to be honest and open about the facts. Scenes 1 - 4 are taken on the fringe of all our cities and are ideally suited to urban growth.

We can have more bio-diversity, less air pollution, healthier children and more affordable housing if we go with scene No 6, not scenes 1 - 5.

There have been numerous reports from the UK over the last several years clearly establishing that the English suburban garden embodies the greatest biodiversity in the UK environment. Similar studies in New Zealand would almost certainly find that our own greatest biodiversity is in established suburban gardens in and around our cities, and increasingly in the wide variety of small-farms and lifestyle blocks in peri-urban and rural areas. The medium and high-density housing, which dominates Smart Growth development, and in which lawns and gardens are replaced with paving, pebbles and cactus, are the real Dead Zones.

Hence, any alternatives to Smart Growth should enable individual landowners and developers to enhance and promote biodiversity.

While ordinary gardens go some way to achieving superior biodiversity, District Plan rules can also encourage the repair, restoration and enhancement of natural and native vegetation, watercourses and wetlands, and so generally promote sustainable development as defined in the RMA.

A FULL RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

The alternative “package” should enable growth which achieves sustainable management in the major categories of human occupation which include:

- Metropolitan areas (i.e. typical fully urbanized developments)
- Peri-urban areas. (i.e. the areas on the fringes of metropolitan areas in which normal “spread” occurs and in which residents continue to relate to the metropolitan area, even if only to the fringe and other suburbs.
- True Rural and Coastal Areas – (i.e. areas which are not strongly oriented to one or other major settlements and which focus on the immediate neighbours and amenity.)

These are broad categories, and the RMA objectives, policies and rules for each location should be tailored to meet particular circumstances and to respond to particular issues. A “rural hamlet” in the Otago plains will be different from a “rural hamlet” on the shores of the Kaipara Harbour. Although both may be designed to address the same market they should respond to different environmental issues, and promote sustainable management as defined in section 5 in their own particular way.

The examples I shall use to illustrate these alternatives are not intended to be universal solutions, but serve only to illustrate the different kinds of development appropriate for these general growth areas.

Note, too, that these three growth areas are not ranked in some priority of virtue. People who want to live in the countryside should be enabled to do so, just as people who want to live in the CBD should be enabled to do so. For thirty years my wife and I enjoyed both a downtown apartment in Auckland City and our retreat at Karekare on the West Coast. We were in walking distance of the nightclubs in High Street and in walking distance of the surf at Karekare.

METROPOLITAN GROWTH

Cities are complex systems and display the behaviour described by the mathematics of “deterministic chaos”. We cannot predict the behaviour of such systems because their future behaviour changes dramatically with only a small change in inputs. Whole economies and subsets of economies, such as stock markets, behave this way and cities are a subset of the whole economy. However, the behaviour of such systems is not “random” or “chaotic” in the traditional sense of the word. These Chaotic systems are self-evolving and exhibit high levels of spontaneous order. Life itself is the best example of a complex chaotic system exhibiting spontaneous order. Life has no “head office” because it does not need one. The beauty of such systems is that they are adaptive, and respond to changes in their environment, and will normally self-correct if left alone.

The history of urban planning is a history of people trying to imposing “simple” patterns over urban areas with the aim of creating some form of order for the map-makers – which in itself is a fairly harmless activity, frequently called “urban geography”. The potentially harmful extension of this pattern imposition occurs when “master planners” attempt to force these metropolitan areas into “order” (even though they are already highly-ordered) by directing and controlling the use of land to meet some pre-determined pattern or idealized “urban form”.

Such interventions in chaotic systems normally make the perceived “problem” worse, or generate new ones, because such systems respond and reconfigure themselves in unexpected ways.

One simple model of urban form is the “Manhattan Model” in which a high-density core is surrounded by lower-density development. Many people love New York and its skyline, even though no one designed the skyline. It’s a fine example of spontaneous order. The other is the London model – in which there is no dominant high-density centre but only a group of villages distributed within an extensive “central area”. London has no readily identifiable “heart” but this has never distressed Londoners or any of the people who continue to flock to visit, live and work there.

After the Second World War Auckland City was developing along the London model with numerous villages developing on the ridges of Parnell, Ponsonby and Karangahape Road, and at villages nodes such as Remuera, Mt Eden and Greenlane, and Tamaki Drive.

The City Council was dominated by the Queen Street Business Association who saw these villages as “competition” and hence wanted to focus development on Queen Street.

They saw a motorway system as a means of sustaining this highly centralised model. When De Leuw Cather, the traffic engineers from San Francisco, designed the proposed motorway system they responded to the actual multi-nodal nature of Auckland and distributed the traffic around the ridges to enable Auckland to continue its spontaneous “natural” development. The city fathers rejected this approach in favour of the present “solution” intended to concentrate traffic and activity in the City’s “heart”. The resulting congestion and the poor design of the interchanges actually hastened decentralization. Manukau City, Waitakere City, North Shore, and Albany have grown more rapidly than would probably have been the case had the de Leuw Cather scheme been accepted.

Smart Growth has the same “unexpected” outcomes.

For example the American States with the strongest anti-sprawl rules have the highest rates of urban sprawl. People simply leap-frog to more remote locations, and in New Zealand, may even move to other countries.

We should accept that our cities will be low density, multi-nodal cities, that density has no intrinsic merit, and delivers no benefits in its own right. Different densities should reflect people’s preferences for diverse housing types, but nothing more. Density is a measure, not a goal – although density measurement has always been an attractive tool to those determined to Rule.

When we want to think about Auckland’s “Urban Form” – and some seem compelled to do so – then we should think of London, and its medium-rise villages. We should then let these villages be and let them achieve their being.

PERI-URBAN GROWTH

Smart Growth policies are intended to halt, or at least delay, peri-urban growth, which is crudely described as “sprawl”. But cities have always “sprawled” – that is how they grow. Manhattan reaches for the sky only because Manhattan Island is bounded by rivers. Across the river New Yorkers live in low-density suburbs. This is why the people who live in Los Angeles Metropolitan area actually live at a higher average density than those of Metropolitan New York.

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However, we should understand that Aucklanders do not want undifferentiated Carpet Sprawl and that the majority of New Zealanders now want development to have regard to the natural and physical environment. These environmental concerns are captured in the legal framework of the RMA and also represent the preferences of the market.

As a real estate agent said to me ten years ago “You cannot sell paddocks any more.”

I have no problem persuading subdividers to restore wetlands and native bush because they they know their sections will command a higher price for the same reasons a well designed and decorated house will command a higher price. It’s what people today actually want.

The forces of de-urbanisation mean that many people want to live in peri-urban areas, where they can enjoy reasonable access to the jobs, retail, recreational and cultural facilities of the metropolitan area even if they have no great interest in downtown. The vast majority have absolutely no interest in living near railway stations, if only because the trains don’t take them where they want to go.

Indeed, what the peri-urbanites want is the diversity of old metropolitan activity in their immediate neighbourhood rather than in some remote, inaccessible and congested central location. “New Urbanism” promotes such multi-use and variety, but normally comes within the Smart Growth package with its congestion, pollution, excessive densities and lack of biodiversity and other environmental gains. (Smart Growth is not Green Growth.)

So a group of my friends and colleagues in the US, led by Joel Kotkin, have put together their new manual of “New Suburbanism – a Realist’s Guide to the American Future”. (Just search under “New Suburbanism” and download the pdf file.) When I sent this file to Simon Upton in France he replied “There is nothing dramatically new in this!” and of course he is right, which is its strength. The document is important because it accepts suburban growth as the preferred choice of the majority, and accepts that the car is, and will remain, the major means of transport, and simply sets out to do a better job of suburban development rather than attempt to regulate peri-urban suburbs out of our future.

The “New Suburbanist” guideline (Architects and planners normally have “manifestos” – which sound much grander than textbooks or guidelines) explores ten applications including retrofitting old suburbs, brownfield and greenfield development, and all are illustrated with examples.

As it happens a good example of New Suburbanism is currently being proposed as Plan Change 22 to the Kaipara District Council Operative District Plan.



The Zoning Plan for *Estuary Estates* “New Suburbanist” proposal for Mangawhai.

This proposed Plan Change responds to an application by a private company to create a comprehensive development called *Estuary Estates*. The development embodies ten zones including a mixed-use business zone, and a range of residential and amenity zones, as well as a Green Network which includes a Buffer, a Village Green, a Conservation/Coastal area, an Open Space/Bush protection area, Community Networks, and Lakes.

This proposal is a long way from Carpet Sprawl and provides an attractive living environment while promoting Sustainable Development as defined in the RMA. The proposal has widespread community support. It also sits comfortably within the Mangawhai Structure Plan described below.

This kind of *New Suburban* development could sit comfortably in Kumeu, Franklin District or Clevedon, and even in Rodney and Waitakere City. David Henderson’s *Five Mile* Development in Queenstown is also a New Suburbanist development but responds to the particular drivers of the rapid growth Tourism Centre of the South Island.

RURAL/COASTAL GROWTH – THE MANAGED PARK

In our rural and coastal areas there is a strong demand for residential sites ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 square metres in area, probably around a preferred average of say 4,000 sq metres. Sadly most Plans favour a four hectare (40,000 sq m) average lot size as the default minimum. When a small hamlet is developed with an average lot size of 4ha the total area can be managed by grazing sheep and cattle but is far too large to manage with human labour, and machines.

If we halve the average lot size to something under 2ha, then a Managed Park, without livestock, becomes viable – although even this is at the top end. For example eleven dwellings would require a parent title of only 22 ha.

Such an area is manageable by people alone, especially if significant areas are occupied by existing bush, lakes or by enhancement planting. The balance land can now be used for planting tree-crops of all kinds and there is no need to use grazing animals at all. The Park, including the native bush reserves, and the individual “lifestyle” lots can remain unfenced, and boundaries can be defined by plants rather than fences, although fences can be appropriate in some cases if only to restrain dogs and other pets.

When they are not subject to stringent planning regulations, people in the countryside tend to group into hamlets of say five to twenty five dwellings with the average being round a dozen or so. These groupings can be found everywhere – in Africa, France, Italy, Spain, the Americas, Asia and so on.

This behaviour is also in evidence on the Oneriri Peninsula (where I live) – which is hardly surprising.

There are four main reasons for this tendency to group:

- **Family groupings.** One family may move into an area and then encourage other members of the family or friends to come and share the property or live on their own property nearby.
- **Security and neighbouring.** Most people (but not all) do not like to live in total isolation. They prefer to form communities that enable some mutual assistance when needed.
- **Scarcity of ideal sites.** In most cases only a few locations have the qualities sought by purchasers of rural-residential sites – such as harbour

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views, north slope, north views, shelter from the south westerly, proximity to road, power and phone, and proximity to water. People gravitate to these few locations.



This is my own house, one of the four I have personally designed and built on our park. The solar heating unit glints in the sun but that is about it.



This is a view of the Rangiora Road hamlet from Philips road. The highly visible houses are all built on 4 ha lots. My four houses (in oval) are nearly invisible. Planting and design is the key – not lot size, provided the lots are of sufficient size to allow some planting.

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Smart Growth enthusiasts promote the idea of “vibrant communities” and “the neighbourhood tradition”. Yet, curiously, those same advocates are enthusiasts for the 4ha lot approach to rural subdivision which does little if anything to create a sense of community, because the houses are spaced so far apart and frequently strung out along main highways, which are unpleasant to walk on, and especially to walk the dog on.

To the best of my knowledge the people living in my neighbourhood are not concerned about newcomers joining us in our lifestyle and small-farming activities. They are welcome.

Certainly, no one complains about loss of rural amenity and the transfer of pastoral farming into olive groves, native planting, orchards, and other activities which promote biodiversity and help heal degraded soils. We enjoy sharing our knowledge and experience.

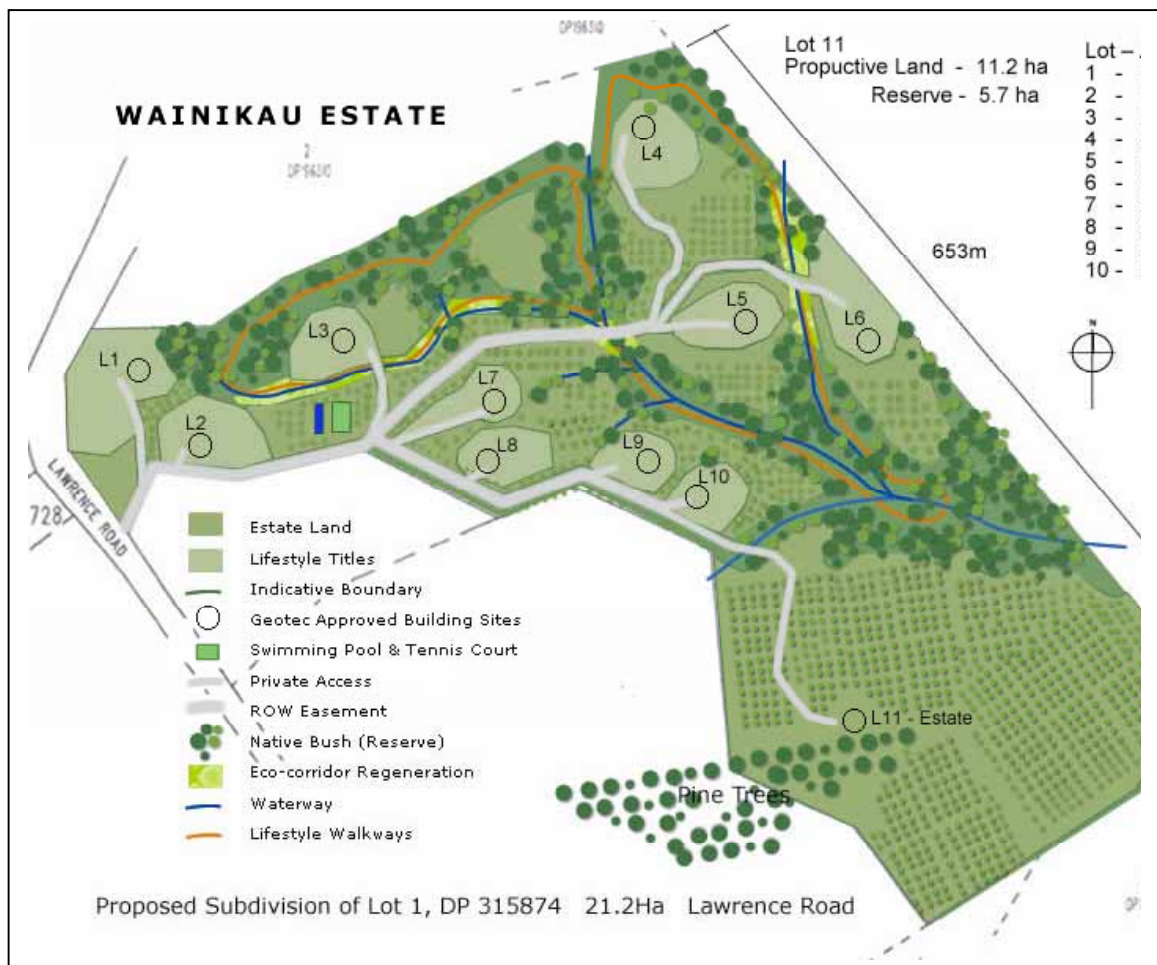


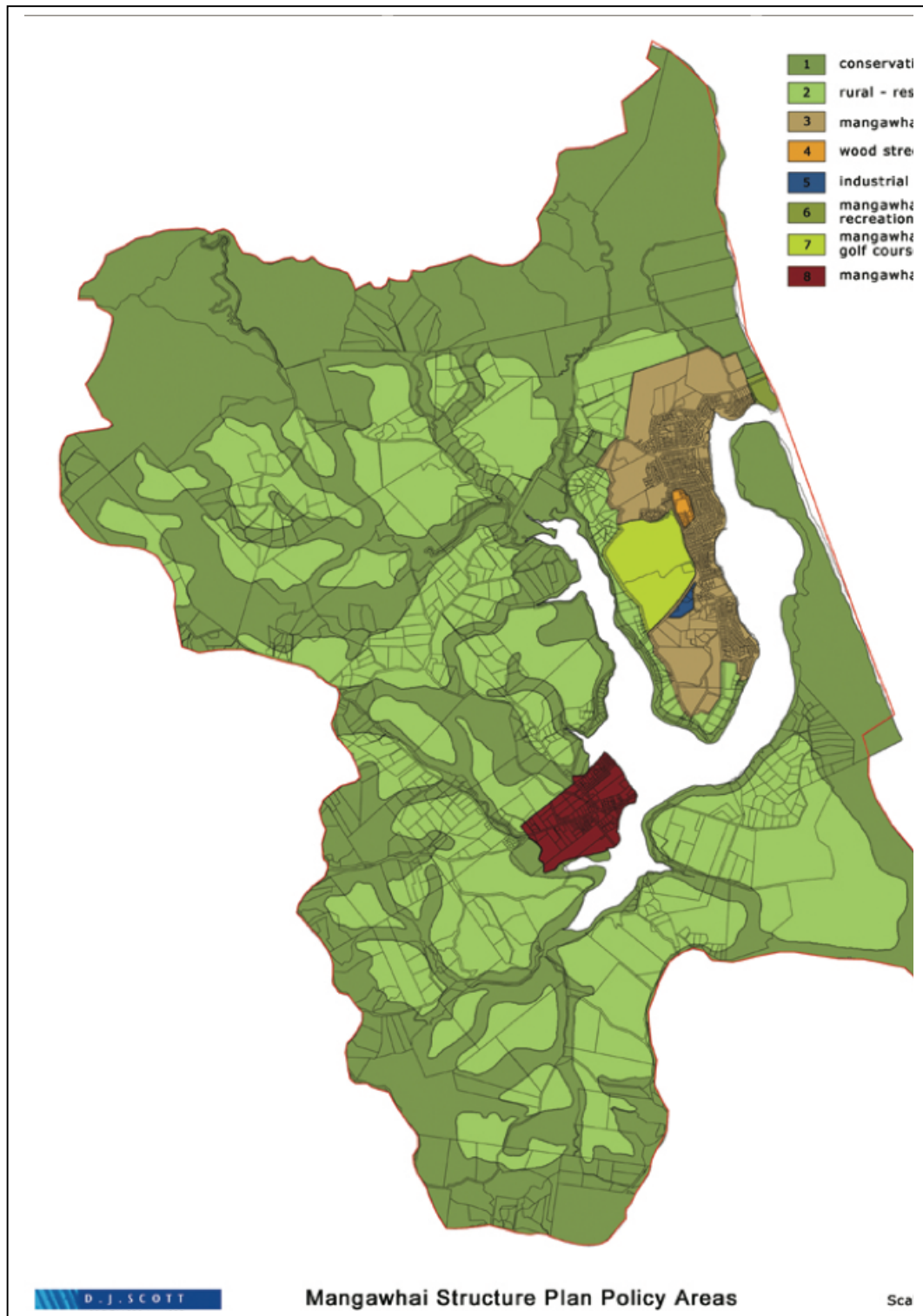
Those who help harvest the olives deserve something in return.

THE MANGAWHAI STRUCTURE PLAN

The Kaipara District Council commissioned D. J. Scott and Associates to prepare the Mangawhai Structure Plan which promoted a catchment management approach to rural residential development in the Mangawhai area. The plan encourages the repair, restoration and protection of wetlands and natural areas as part of the development process and promotes sustainable management to everyone's benefit. (See below)

The following shows a Managed Park (Green Growth) Hamlet designed to sit within the Catchment and which developed a managed park which in turn enabled the protection and enhancement of the waterways, and areas of natural bush. The average site area is 2 ha, and the total Park area is 22 ha.





This map of policy areas shows the “green corridors and connections” which are to be enhanced restored and protected as subdivision proceeds.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented three categories of urban growth and development which would promote sustainable management as defined in the RMA and which meet the general aspirations of people and communities of New Zealand, while avoiding the economic costs and the environmental degradation of Smart Growth.

These three categories are:

- Multi nodal metropolitan development.
- The New Suburbanism for Peri-Urban development.
- Managed Parks and Green Growth for Rural and Coastal Development.

These are not presented as blue-prints to be slavishly imposed on Regions and Districts of New Zealand. They are simply illustrative of an approach to development which reflects the reality of the preferences being expressed by the people and communities of New Zealand.

None of these will lead to Carpet Sprawl, which ironically is the inevitable outcome of Smart Growth. Smart Growth also delivers unaffordable housing, congestion, pollution and high costs to everyone involved in growing and developing our numerous and diverse economies.

It seems to me there is no contest.

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