

Submission to the Hutt City Council's District Plan Review Subcommittee

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I have lived in my current house in Boulcott, Lower Hutt for the last 22 years. It is situated in a quiet, pleasant, and friendly grove. It still has a number of original retired homeowners who built their houses back in the 1970s.

I represent myself as a Lower Hutt homeowner who is concerned about preserving Lower Hutt as a desirable, pleasant, and attractive place to live and which is the envy of other regions. I have no affiliations with any property development businesses or any lobby groups.

I am aware that the Council's Plan Change 43, agreed in 2019, has resulted in a rise of in-fill housing in Lower Hutt. I am also aware that Parliament passed the 'Enabling Housing Supply and Other Matters Amendment Act' which is focused on enabling housing of up to three storeys high in most residential areas.

The changes in the Act also require Council to incorporate medium density residential housing of at least six storeys in parts of our city that are within walking distance of train stations, the CBD and the Petone commercial area. Higher than three storey buildings will also be enabled in residential areas around Avalon, Eastbourne, Moera, Stokes Valley and Wainuiomata suburban commercial centres. Simply put, it is about allowing for greater building heights and building density in the city.

While on the surface of it housing intensification appears to offer benefits to easing the housing shortage problem facing this country, it can also very easily result in irreversible negative consequences on society. It is therefore imperative that we get the housing plan for our city right first time.

Let me be clear. I am not saying 'no' to housing intensification. We obviously need to allow more housing options in certain parts of our city if we are to avoid urban sprawl and cater for our ever-growing population. However, in the last few years I have seen first-hand in Lower Hutt, people's quality of life and enjoyment in their homes evaporate and their property values and financial security negatively impacted by the property developers greedily shoe-horning multi-level residential buildings onto overcrowded neighbouring sections.

The consequences of having a poor district plan are not always immediate obvious or easily recognisable until things are on an irreversible path and it is too late to change back. That is why the people need the Council to act responsibly and fairly and make decisions which are overall in the best interests of the greater good, while minimising as far as practicable any negative impacts. Compromises will inevitably be required in any planning process where there are competing interests, however, the needs of all society groups need to be considered fairly and equitably when it comes to the issue of housing intensification.

In the last few years when property values were rising relatively quickly, we have seen property developers become very active in Lower Hutt. Their prime motive of course is to make a profit from property development. However,

there is little evidence they have given any consideration during their planning stage, or hold any social conscience about how their buildings could affect the overall quality of living for the people residing in the surrounding area.

A typical property development by Williams Corporation -



Before (above)



After: *Seven two-story dwellings (note the large tree gone, and the shadows cast onto the neighbouring home from the two-story houses tight on the boundary).*

So, what can be the negative consequences of housing intensification?

Street Parking - With a higher concentration of people living in a smaller area, there naturally comes with it competition for the use of available space. Residence of in-fill housing complexes are parking their cars, trailers, and motorhomes on the street outside other residence homes. This can lead to frustration and conflicts among residents. More and more I am seeing remote parking of vehicles in our street, and this is a major annoyance for visiting family and friends. Even trades people such as home garden and mowing service providers are having difficulty getting a street park near where they have to unload and load equipment onto trailers or trucks.



Street parking space taken up in my street (April 2023).

Typically, most households in New Zealand have on average two cars¹. As stated in a recent University of Auckland study paper on New Zealand's car ownership culture, this relatively high car ownership is causing problems for the housing intensification developments because the streets are not designed as places for residents to park cars, and the in-fill homes are now typically designed with a garage space or off-street parking for just one car, if at all.

Curb side collections - On rubbish day, curb-side plastic rubbish bins can swamp the sidewalks and make life a nightmare for disability scooters, wheelchair users and mum's trying to take a pushchair to the corner dairy or walk the kids to school. The rubbish bins can be frequently be found blown over after being emptied, and this can make life very difficult (and sometimes unsafe) for footpath users.

¹ University of Auckland discussion paper dated 18 February 2021 (<https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2021/02/18/nz-car-ownership-culture-cant-be-future.html#:~:text=Typically%2C%20there%20are%20two%20cars%20per%20household>).



St Columbans Grove, Lower Hutt (April 2023)



High St, Lower Hutt (April 2023)

Loss of privacy – This is a significant negative consequence of in-fill housing. The property developers naturally utilise all available land space on sections and typically position multi-level homes close to the boundary lines. As a case in point, a Lower Hutt homeowner of a substantial property with a built-in outdoor swimming pool can now no longer enjoy swimming or sunbathing by the pool in private because of homes now built close to their backyard boundary directly overlooking the pool (see photographs below – note the mature trees removed to make way for the new houses). The home owners with the pool could do nothing to protect their privacy invasion by the two-story homes.

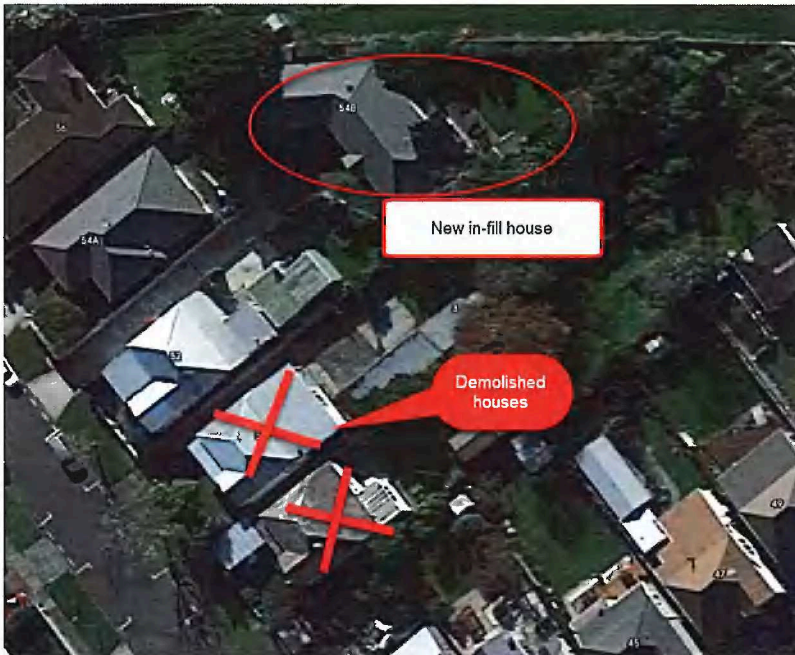


Before: Lower Hutt (circa 2018)



After: (Bobbio Cres), Lower Hutt (built 2018-2020)

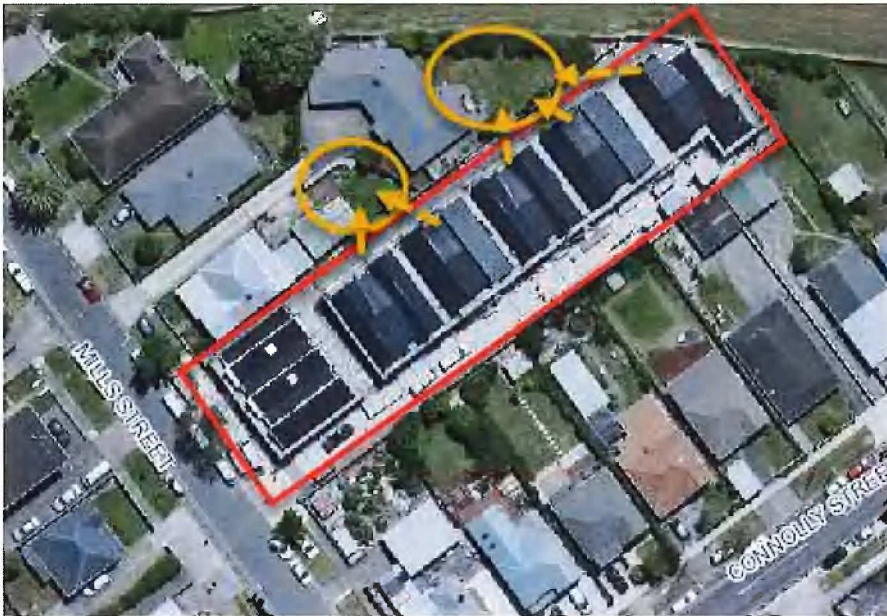
In another recent case, a new single level house with a private backyard was built in Mills Street, Lower Hutt on a sub-divided back section. Ironically, this new (in-fill) house was shortly afterwards affected by a further in-fill property development right next door. Within 18 months of the new home being built, a property developer had brought two neighbouring houses and demolished them.



Before the townhouse development (as shown above)

The property developer then built 13 identical semi-attached two-story townhouses. 6 of these townhouses now look directly into the backyard of the new house, and 4 of the townhouses overlook the backyard of the house in front.





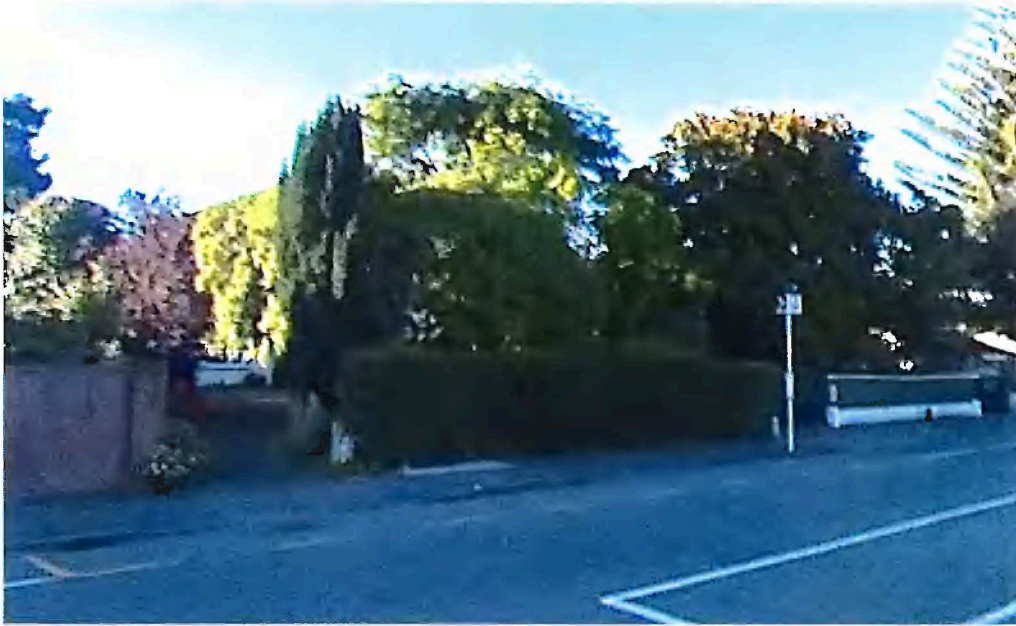
None of the new townhouses built are in keeping with the other character period homes in the street, and there is now no street parking available because of all the additional cars owned by the new residence. The building of the townhouses next door undoubtedly devalued the newly built house and greatly diminished the quality of living in the home due to the invasion of their privacy by the new multiple neighbours.

In the last month a property developer has demolished two houses on the boundary (northern side) of 6 properties in our street. The domino effect then started (which is exactly what the property developers hope for). One of the home owners sold out to the property developer when he learnt his neighbour's property had been brought out by the developer. When one of the neighbouring property owners in our street got wind of the development, they sold up fast and moved to Australia. Suddenly the whole neighbourhood dynamics changed, and not for the better.

14 two-story houses are planned on the site which was previously occupied by two large established homes on lovely tree covered sections. None of the neighbouring property owners in our street were consulted about the development before it started.

In the last few weeks, the property developer has cleaned felled every tree on the two sections and demolished the two houses. 9 neighbouring properties have been directly impacted by this development.

In a few weeks the properties went from this (December 2022): 773-775 High Street



To this (March 2023): All trees clean-felled from the sections and houses demolished.



Loss of natural sunlight and views – a major issue in the housing intensification approach is that it hasn't given much consideration for what is over the fence. Neighbours get no say before their sun or view is taken. Multi-story terraced housing built close to property boundaries will not only potentially affect the privacy of the neighbours and block views, it can also limit natural light and therefore could impact on things like solar panels, solar heating systems and natural heating of homes through convection, especially during winter months. Upper Hutt urban planner Allison Tindale has written an article calling it 'daylight robbery'². She stated in her article that the proposed medium density standards have the potential to result in existing suburban homes with good solar access, losing almost all direct

² Refer to <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2111/S00081/daylight-robbery.htm>

sunlight over winter. A cost-benefit analysis done by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC)³ for the government concluded that property owners potentially faced losing tens of thousands of dollars from their property's market value and there will likely be significant impact on people's quality of life from the lack of sunshine getting to properties.

Loss of green space - When housing density increases, there is often a corresponding decrease in the amount of green space available. Lack of green space can lead to increased urban heat island effects, reduced air quality and compound the impact of flooding events. Trees provide more than amenity value. They support biodiversity and provide shade. They are our city's lungs and are vital for reducing and/or offsetting emissions and combating climate change. Associate Professor Joe Hurley⁴ from RMIT's Centre for Urban Research said city greenery not only helps reduce urban heat, it was also key in managing stormwater and provided physical and mental health benefits. He said green cover should be managed as critical infrastructure alongside communications, transport, water and the electricity network. According to Victoria University of Wellington climate scientist James Renwick and University of Auckland urban planning lecturer Timothy Welch, Auckland, along with many other areas in the country, experiences ageing stormwater infrastructure systems which are unable to cope with population growth and the impact of climate change. Tar seals and concrete surfaces on roads, carparks, and buildings are preventing rainwater from dispersing into the ground, causing water to pool up and surfaces to flood during heavy rain events. The significant flooding event in Auckland in January this year is a prime example of what can happen when urban planning fails to provide adequate green space in our cities. Meteorologists call these type of intense rainfall events an "atmospheric river". Climate change has arrived and we clearly have not built our cities to cope.



Flooding and slip damage in Auckland (27 January 2023)

³ Refer to <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/property/300458151/what-is-the-price-of-sunlight-householders-face-losing-billions-under-intensification-rules>

⁴ Refer to <https://www.news.com.au/technology/environment/lack-of-trees-exacerbates-extreme-heat-effects-in-australian-suburbs/news-story/0825f8746b7e3e25be04e21140da4637>



Stokes Valley slip on Council land (house has since been demolished 2023)

Strains on facilities and services – As seen Auckland, housing intensification can overwhelm already stressed stormwater infrastructure and contribute to worsening flood damage to homes and property. It is a given fact that we unfortunately are going to see more frequent extreme weather events with climate change. We therefore need to ensure our urban planning doesn't compound the effects of high intense rainfall events causing damage to homes and property. As we well know, due to the geology of Lower Hutt, this region is very vulnerable to extreme rainfall events. Recent slips in Stokes Valley have led to homes being red-stickered and eventually demolished.

Loss of community identity - Housing intensification can also lead to the loss of community identity. When neighbourhoods are intensively redeveloped, the character of the area can change. This can lead to a loss of community pride and sense of belonging. Additionally, as the population increases, there can be a decrease in social cohesion and an increase in social isolation and more anti-social behaviour like crime and graffiti. This can have negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing of the residence, and a noticeable reduction in pride and care for the area.

Increased road traffic congestion - Another disadvantage of housing intensification is the potential for increased road traffic congestion. As the number of housing units in a given area increases, so does the number of residents, and therefore the number of vehicles on the road. This can lead to increased traffic congestion, more road noise, more difficulty turning onto busy roads and an increased risk of traffic accidents, and decreased air quality.

Increased noise - When housing density increases, so does the potential for noise pollution. This can be particularly problematic in areas near busy roads or public transport, where noise levels can be disruptive to residents. The noise created by people activity and movements (e.g. closing doors - house, garage, or vehicles; vehicle engine noises, loud music, outside conversations) can also contribute to increased noise levels that can cause sleep disturbance, annoyance and inhibit quiet enjoyment within the home. This in turn can lead to increased stress and anxiety, and other health related issues.

Where to build?

The government's National Policy Statement on Urban Development (NPS-UD) requires the Council to identify walkable catchments around the city centre, metropolitan centres and existing and planned rapid transit stops, and enable buildings of at least six storeys within these areas.

Auckland council have taken a pragmatic approach of defining a walkable catchment as being an average 10-minute walk (around 800 metres) from the edge of the metropolitan centres and around existing and planned rapid transit stops, such as a train station entrance point. The measurement of walkable catchments reflects the actual routes and distances people can walk rather than direct distances 'as-the-crow-flies'. This means that each walkable catchment has a different shape. Distances have been developed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account location-specific factors. These factors include walking obstacles which may limit the distance people can walk in 10 minutes, such as main roads which would involve crossing safely using designated existing pedestrian crossings.

It is recommended that Hutt City Council adopt a similar methodology for working out the walking catchment for housing intensity zoning based on distances from main train and bus interchange stations like Waterloo and Petone.

Minor rail stations along the Hutt Valley rail line (i.e. Wairarapa Line⁵) should not be included in the walkable catchments as there is no justifiable factual basis. Data from the Greater Wellington Regional Council 2017 Rail Survey shows that the number of people walking or taking the bus to a train station on Hutt Valley line is in decline, with at least 50% of the people actually travelling by car to the train stations. The other half either walk or take a bus to the train station.

The largest rail station, Waterloo, sees almost 2,000 passengers during the morning peak, whereas the smaller rail stations, like Western Hutt, Epuni, Wingate and Manor Park are used by less than 150 passengers each. This means there are at least 90% fewer people walking to the smaller train stations compared to the largest rail station. It therefore logically follows that higher density housing should be developed nearer those rail stations which tend to have the greatest number of walk-up train passengers i.e. Waterloo and Petone rail stations.

Housing intensification also needs to be targeted in areas where it will have minimal negative impact for the existing local community. Presently property developers have been given a virtual open ticket to build ad-hoc, pepper-potted

⁵ The rail line through the Hutt Valley is officially known as the Wairarapa Line.

developments which are ruining the lives of ordinary people by wrecking the quality and enjoyment of their home life and property values.

The proposed planning controls are prescriptive rather than descriptive. They don't talk about the important basic aspects that humans need in terms of light, privacy, and the environment that they live in.

I recommend looking abroad for best practice, such as Australia. Review cities like Melbourne which have successful policies and projects which have set design requirements for buildings and public spaces in urban areas. In these cities, developers are provided incentives if building projects contribute positively to the local context and neighbourhood character in their designs.

Summary

In summary, while housing intensification may seem like a simple solution to urban development challenges, it has several disadvantages that is significantly negatively impacting society. These disadvantages include the loss of natural light, loss of privacy, reduced green space, increased traffic congestion, loss of community identity, increased noise levels, and the overwhelming of existing services like stormwater, sewage, water and power. Council needs to carefully consider these potential negative impacts when making decisions about housing intensification to ensure that the benefits outweigh the costs. Those costs need to include the impacts to existing neighbouring properties and overall social costs.

Smarter planning around how to achieve higher density housing without sacrificing the pleasure and heart of the present neighbourhoods is needed. At present the heart of communities is slowly being eroded away with each new housing development. Like a cancer slowly spreading, the city is gradually being placed at greater risk of suffering from the damaging effects of climate change events such as urban heat islands and major floods and slips.

Reviews of how other countries have delivered effective housing intensification should be undertaken to learn from their successes and their mistakes. The severe flooding in Auckland this year is a reminder that our cities need to take another close look about how higher density housing should be managed.

In September last year, the Christchurch City Council decided not to adopt the Government's new housing density rules, but have gone for a scaled back version. Sensibly the council understood the unique requirements of Christchurch City such as having less sunlight hours in winter than many upper North Island cities, and that it has known flood-prone regions.

I therefore recommend that this Council lobbies the Government to defer present timeframes for introducing housing intensification changes, particularly considering the recent flooding events in Northland, Auckland and Hawkes Bay, and the major slips that have occurred in the Hutt Valley. Rushed decisions in the midst of complex issues usually never delivers good results. Plans needs to accommodate the expected impacts of climate change, and just as importantly, they need to consider the impacts to existing neighbouring properties.

I also recommend that this Council adopts the methodology being developed by Auckland Council for determining walkable catchments, and centre this around the main train/bus interchange stations at locations like Waterloo and Petone.

Let's not also forget today's decisions on district planning will impact on people's basic quality of life and enjoyment for many generations to come. Human's need access to outdoor spaces, sunlight, privacy, and peace. If we forget those basic needs in future building developments, we do so at our peril and this Council will be scorned by all in the future. No-one wants a city full of sterile cookie-cutter Tetris style boxes surrounded by concrete and asphalt. We need to understand the impact of these plans and visualise what the Hutt needs to look like to be functional, appealing, and resilient to climate change. Lets get the recipe right by taking the time to plan smartly. Our future depends on it.