

Disgust as development gets go ahead

North Shore City has approved residential development plans for Long Bay. But as CRAIG BORLEY, SARAH MENZIES and JOCELYN REIN report, much of the public is disgusted.

After a decade of opposition, 10,000 submissions and millions of dollars of ratepayers' money, rural land behind the Long Bay Regional Park was recently given over to residential development.

A 1996 Environment Court decision cleared the way for development of the land, changing its zoning from rural to residential.

Opponents have had their say, and with such overwhelming opposition many thought democracy would stop the development. The people were asked, and the people have spoken. But it appears the people have lost.

There's a lot of land – and a lot of money – at stake here. The current park spans 152ha, while the planned subdivision will cover some 200ha. The landowner, Landco Ltd, is set to make or lose millions of dollars. Already, with legal battles and public submissions over the last 10 years, the land has come at a premium.

Despite the cost, the issue has struck a chord with the public. The deciding council meeting at North Shore City Council's Takapuna council chambers was overflowing with members of the public.

They brought banners and eloquent speeches. Some interjected with impassioned pleas for "reason", others stood up and stoically challenged the council to be clear about its intentions. Accusations of scaremongering and "pure theatre" were met by steely eyed councillors determined to ignore the anger. Why was there such strong feeling?

Long Bay Regional Park has been a part of Aucklanders' weekends for years. More than 1.5 million visitors flock to the sprawling reserve each year, attracted by its white sandy beach, extensive picnic areas and protected marine environment. It has a children's train and a large playground, and the old Vaughan Homestead is reputedly haunted. And just an easy, 20-minute walk around the northern point is Pohutukawa Bay, an idyllic stretch of sand treasured by many naturalists as the region's premiere nudist beach.

Behind all this are the rolling green hills that rise up into the distance, forming that quintessentially Kiwi green and blue horizon that is now all but lost from the rest of North Shore City.

It is this backdrop that has caused such a stir. Landco plans to mould it into a subdivision of some 1800 houses. The council's restrictions do call for the ridgelines to be left bare and the development to comply with the intrinsic nature of the site. However, even with the use of green space alongside high-density housing, the green hills will be lost. And so, some fear, will the charm of Long Bay.

Simply speaking, there were three options for this block of land. It could be changed back to rural zoning and left as it is. It could be developed into the residential suburb that now has the green light from the city council. Or, it could be bought and added to the existing park, turning the area into a massive green space. With the park and marine reserve already proving such a hit with ratepayers and tourists, the call for this third option was loud.

When North Shore City took public submissions on its residential plans for the land, it received a staggering 10,000 submissions calling for the development to be stopped.

In comparison, those that supported the bulldozing of the green hills numbered fewer than 100. This process of public notification and submissions is central to New Zealand's local government democracy. But it is often expensive, divisive, and, in this case, seemingly pointless.

Council senior policy advisor John Duguid says the cost of the democratic process was certainly high - well into the millions of dollars. This has essentially been paid by ratepayers, he says.

"Legislation is set down by central government, with the setting of zones and rules for development. The council has to front up and pay the bill," he says.

He is aware the council has taken the heat over the issue, but says perhaps the inability of the Environment Court to provide for democracy is to blame.

"The public can't really have a crack at the Environment Court, so it's the council that comes under pressure. It isn't always nice, but it's a fact of life."

But is there a point in having an expensive democratic system that ignores the people it is paying to represent? Fiona McLaughlin, Long Bay Okura Great Parks Society convener, isn't sure.

"It's politics, isn't it," she says. "You can't categorically say you're being ignored but it seems like it."

At the crucial council meeting, McLaughlin urged councillors to consider the "everlasting effect" their decision would have on the life quality of future generations of North Shore residents and other Kiwis.

"What legacy would you prefer to leave them? A great park? Or just more development?"

The 1000-strong Long Bay Okura Great Park Society is the main opponent of the development. The voluntary organisation was set up by members of the public to fight to purchase the land from Landco and add it to the regional park.

Society's members have put in "thousands of hours" work for the fight. McLaughlin says the park's rural backdrop is paramount to its uniqueness. Developed, she says, Long Bay will become just like any other North Shore beach. "It's quite disgusting really."

Long Bay is also well stocked with archaeological treasures but as the tractors and trucks roll in, Aucklanders will be losing access to these sites. Sites that date back almost 1000 years will be contained inside private property, a fact that riles McLaughlin.

She says Aucklanders would be far happier to see the sites in a park environment.

She also has concerns for the park's marine reserve, fearing it could be hurt by the nearby developments.

"It's likely that it will destroy the marine reserve."

Both the Auckland Regional Council and North Shore City have raised concerns about the effects of sedimentation on the marine reserve. While the council aims to minimise such damage, McLaughlin feels it is playing a dangerous game.

But there are more than just environmental concerns or aesthetic preferences at stake here. Some have argued that North Shore City, and Auckland as a region, is in desperate need of a green-belt, an area of park land providing recreational facilities and acting as a border against future sprawl.



PHOTO: SARAH MENZIES

PRIME REAL ESTATE: Long Bay Beach, adjacent to the soon-to-be-developed farmland.

Dr Bruce Hucker, senior lecturer of planning at the University of Auckland, believes greenbelts are immensely important in limiting the sprawl of cities.

"We have a set of metropolitan limits. Greenbelts maintain an amount of greenery that serves ecological functions," he says.

"They are also important in the Auckland region in terms of ensuring there are limits to the sprawl taking place."

But Landco is aware of the huge public objection to its plans, says head of corporate communications George Hulbert.

The company is doing its best to develop the land in a way that benefits the public, he says.

"The 200-acre-plus regional park will remain. In addition, we'll be creating five local parks of between 2500 and 5000sq m within the development, based on comfortable five minute walks for all residents living in the urban areas of the lower valley."

"A 5.1ha existing sports field reserve in between Long Bay College and Long Bay Primary School will remain."

Landco says it has also proposed what it calls a continuous 3km "green-belt", which would "enable people to walk on grass from Long Bay Beach all the way to Okura Beach Road".

He says it shouldn't be forgotten that the Environment Court zoned the land for urban development in 1996, before Landco purchased it. Landco has created its structure plan accordingly.

"Landco started with the premise that the Long Bay land . . . intended to be urbanised," says Hulbert.

"Landco put forward a structure plan that, in our view, meets the Urban Growth Strategy and provides a viable, desirable, and liveable community for Long Bay."

He also notes population growth in North Shore City means land needs to be found.

Without the development, approximately 100ha of land would need to be found elsewhere, he says.

Hulbert says Landco's proposal provides the most realistic solution. "It gives suitable direction for development and particularly good urban form, while not being overly prescriptive."

"It provides the most efficient use of land, fulfilling the requirements of the Urban Growth Strategy."

"Landco values the Long Bay area

highly and is seeking only the highest quality outcomes."

But McLaughlin sees the North Shore's impending growth as the overarching reason to preserve the land. The city's population is expected to grow by 15 to 20 per cent in the next 15 years and McLaughlin says a park is the key to minimising the sprawl.

She thinks councillors are being short-sighted in their dismissal of the park. "I think they will all regret it," she says.

She describes the council as "frustrating", as it unanimously approved support for the Great Park but was unable to find funding. "Then they didn't pursue it, and it just sort of died."

Although most individual councillors are in favour of the Great Park, she says "they can't fund it by themselves".

At the April 26 council meeting that rubber-stamped the land's future, many councillors voiced their dismay. Councillor Chris

Darby was incensed at the apparent lack of democracy being afforded the ratepayers.

Legal experts had explained that "case law" meant the voting process was only a rubber-stamping exercise.

At this, he launched a scathing attack on the development, and on the short-sightedness of the previous councils.

"We need to take a look back and see how vision-impaired that decision was. Pushing the metropolitan urban limit out may have delivered development, but it didn't deliver smart development."

"The 'shoreburbia' approach is at an end, and it should have ended in 1995. All the great cities have great parks."

"Case law prohibits the democratic process. I'm very uneasy with this shackle, and it really is a shackle on democracy."

McLaughlin sees the fight as far from over. In a private meeting held recently, the Great Park society decided to appeal to the Environment Court.

A possible solution could lie in forming a coalition with another party, such as the Auckland Regional Council, to fund the purchase of 150ha of Great Park land.

She says despite the massive expense for a seemingly disappointing outcome, she would go through the process again. She is optimistic about the possibilities.

"There are still things to happen. There's still more money to be spent."

Democracy may have failed them, but the people have not quite quit yet.

"It provides the most efficient use of the land."