

THE GAP Draft CONCEPT PLA – SUBMISSION 2017-01-31

Piha Ratepayers & Residents Assn.

Q1. How do you feel about developing tracks linking the Hillary Trail between the Mercer Bay Loop Track and Tasman Lookout Track?

AGREE

Our view is that it should be a track and not TRACKS. There does need to be a track coming down Gentle Annie but whether others are needed is debatable. We would want the Gentle Annie track not be over-engineered or visible as a series of slashes against the hillside vegetation. We ask that a route that necessitates as little intrusive engineering as possible be selected.

Q2. How do you feel about developing a loop track incorporating Lovett Stream and the Tennis Courts?

DISAGREE

We are not happy to have this track constructed until an indepth ecological assessment of the area is carried out. This track does not seem to us to be at all necessary; the area should be carved up as little as possible.

Q3. Do you have any comments on the layout of tracks shown in the draft concept plan?

We are very concerned about the new section of track proposed to run through what is now a gorse-infested hillside. That would take recreational users directly into an area where there is a real risk of fire. As we state below, there have been devastating fires in this area in recent times. This seems too great a risk to take.

Q4. How do you feel about the position of the viewing locations shown in the draft concept plan?

NEUTRAL

There do seem to be rather a lot of them. We agree that they will probably be needed in the dangerous cliff-edge area. It will entirely depend on how they are constructed; they must not be too intrusive and must be as low key as possible.

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Q5. Which of the following options do you prefer for a boardwalk in the herb field area?

- Option 1 - A boardwalk located towards the back of the main herb field and through the sedge land species, crossing through one or two sections of herb field
- Option 2 – A boardwalk located in front but close to the main herb field, crossing through the herb field and sedge land species

Why is a board walk necessary if it is not going to be maintained as an open herb field? A path seems sufficient if letting it be recolonised is the course of action.

Q6. The area known as the Tennis Courts was gardened in the past to create a coastal herb field seen in historic photos, remnants of which can be seen today. In order to maintain this area as it was, there would need to be substantial on-going maintenance including weeding and keeping re-generating natives at bay. Do you support this as an option or would you rather see it re-generate naturally?

DO NOT SUPPORT ONGOING MAINTENANCE

We are in favour of nature taking its course and we are not confident that Council would be able to maintain this area with the assiduous care shown by Mr Byers until his death. The weeds - gorse, grass, lupins etc - that are in there now should be removed and continually kept bay in a systematic fashion so that it regenerates with native plants only.

Q7. Do you have any other feedback on the draft concept plan?

The Piha Residents and Ratepayers Association has been in existence for 87 years. Its committee is democratically elected every year and its long history and the long collective memories of its members mean that it has a very highly developed sense of the essential values of this coastal environment, which is now under so much pressure as visitor numbers grow.

It is important that the Council understand the spiritual relationship that many generations of Piha people (those who live there, have a bach there and come out to the coast regularly to swim, fish, surf, tramp and holiday) have with The Gap area. That relationship is, of course, preceded by the spiritual relationship that its tangata whenua, Te Kawerau a Maki, have with the area. The Gap has always been a magnificent, powerful, remote and almost fabled place. Few people had access to it, increasing its allure and mystique. There was acclaim when the Byers family decided to sell the land to the Council and the people of Auckland. Now there is access, but this does not at all mean that Council should now open it all up and turn it into a sort of urban park, with tracks, signs and viewing platforms liberally dotted across the landscape. Aucklanders do not *have to have* access to all parts of it facilitated by intensive infrastructure. That will only serve to diminish the landscape's force and subvert the need for its environmental rejuvenation. *Some* access is quite enough.

The concept plan was recently discussed at our AGM, which was attended by 30 people. Members have also contacted us with their detailed views since, and so we believe that we have a good grasp of a representative view of the Piha community.

In light of the preliminary comments above, it should come as no surprise that it is the Association's view that the concept plan unduly and inappropriately places its emphasis on recreation over the environment. Further, it is hasty and rash in recommending major track- and viewing- platform work ahead of any sort of thorough-going, foundational ecological research. That research must be commissioned before any decisions are made. The plan also ignores the glaring need for the restoration of the extensive, currently significantly compromised areas of the site that are infested with gorse and climbing asparagus.

The plan would put a new track through a densely gorsed area which is highly flammable and would result in a high fire risk. In the last 15 years there have been major and devastating fires in this area. Revegetation that would mitigate against fires (although it can never entirely prevent them) could be done in a staged manner, starting along the track margins with the replanting running deeply enough that a carelessly tossed cigarette butt could not easily ignite in the gorse.

Overall, the concept plan is silent on the removal of the various invasive weed species that are well established in the area. Given that the plan will be presented to Community & Environment Committee with a budget, that budget needs to include the costs of restoration and weed control.

There is no mention of the risk of, and mitigation against, kauri dieback in the plan yet there are kauri on the property. The plan is silent on how kauri dieback would be dealt with should it be discovered.

We believe an ecological plan and a long-term restoration and vegetation management plan and should be integrated into the concept plan.

We note that current dog rules prohibit dogs from Lion Rock south through to The Gap. This policy needs to be continued at this extended Gap property.

Car parking at top of the Piha Road is not provided for in the plan but in our view demand for it will arise as people elect to walk down to The Gap. How will this be handled given the congestion that already exists on that part of the Piha hill when drivers stop to look at the view?

The plan is silent on the fauna of the area and its protection: little blue penguins, fernbird and – it is thought - petrels are all in the area.

The Association does not agree that mountain bikes should be permitted on the tracks in the area.

The Association is wary of intrusive, 'bossy' signage that seeks to force modalities of thinking on visitors. Already the new signage at The Gap is an intrusion into a magnificent wild space. We think people are quite capable of forming their own views about what they are seeing. Historic information can be placed on a website where it can be accessed easily later. It does not have to be read in situ. For example there is no signage at the Tasman Lookout or Te Waha Point lookouts. The area should not be too 'domesticated' or made to seem too tamed and signage has that effect. If there *must* be signage detailing the tangata whenua and Pakeha history of the area then let it be small, discrete and located on only one spot.

It is our overall view that the plan attempts too much at once, and is unbalanced and overly grandiose in its aspirations. It would be more prudent to build the track that links to the Hillary Trail, and some viewing platforms in the short term, but then not build any more tracks until the vegetation is restored, if they are to be built at all. If they are to be built, extending the tracks would be much better phased over several years -- decades if necessary -- in order to get this right. In this very precious place there is too much at stake to rush things. Council should resist the temptation to carve the area up and domesticate it.

