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The Christchurch Green Belt – Reality or Just a Name?

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Abstract

The Green belt concept grew out of the English Garden City movement of the nineteenth century. Although the thoughts and theory were widespread throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it was not until 1959 that green belt policy became legislative reality. The initial result was the London Green Belt: other green belts around major cities followed. The predominant objective of the green belt at that time was to restrict urban sprawl, and the concept was initially well supported by citizens, planners and the British government. The British government attaches great importance to green belts, which have been an essential element of planning policy for some four decades. The purposes of green belt policy and the related development control policies set out in 1955 remain valid today with remarkably little alteration. This sophisticated and comprehensive approach provided a model that many other cities around the world have since followed. Christchurch for example inherited its planning legacy from the British experience. Although first defined in 1954 as a 'non-settlement area', (meaning the same thing) it was not until the 1980's that the term 'green belt' was formally used in New Zealand statutory planning documents. Since then (particularly in the later 1990's) there has been speculation that the green belt philosophy has begun to fade. The green belt containment policy was designed to thwart urban spread but has instead led to piecemeal development. Essentially, this has led to a rethink of the green belt. There is some speculation that the codification of green belt policy that originated in 1955 in London is not applicable to the city of Christchurch. Furthermore, new legislation by the way of the *Resource Management Act* has altered the philosophies of land-use planning and encouraged a new way of thinking. This new thinking is based on sustainable management objectives and has been responsible for much of the green belt's recent decline. No longer can a single land-use tool restrict development in such a large area without considering other potential uses, while simultaneously juggling it with the sustainable management principle. Accordingly it has raised questions as to whether the Christchurch green belt concept is worth keeping, and if not, what other means are available to help continue to promote the green belt objectives that were first introduced many decades ago.

Acknowledgements

I have lived in Christchurch for most of my secondary schooling and university life and have always been aware that a 'green belt' surrounds the City. I have always been familiar with the literal term, however I never really thought about its origins or what its real purpose was for. Having come from a farming background, I guess I thought that cities had to have a definite boundary to protect the agricultural land. It was not until I became interested in planning that I looked at the concept from a different perspective. The most important thing I have learnt from my further study of planning is that there are always two sides to every story. In Christchurch for example, there are conflicts and pressures between using the green belt land for housing a growing population and using the land for its productive use. Often there is no real answer. My supervisors, Derek Williams and Phillip McDermott have strengthened my interest in planning and encouraged me to think further into what might appear simple at face value and question the unquestionable. I thank them for their valuable comments throughout the year. Finally, thank you to my family and friends for their continued support and understanding.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
CHAPTER 1	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE.....	8
CHAPTER 2	10
WHAT IS A GREEN BELT?.....	11
Ebenezer Howard.....	13
Raymond Unwin.....	15
Patrick Abercrombie.....	16
Review.....	18
CHAPTER 3	21
THE APPLICATION OF GREEN BELTS IN ENGLAND.....	22
The London Metropolitan Green Belt.....	29
CHAPTER 4	33
THE APPLICATION OF GREEN BELTS IN NEW ZEALAND.....	34
<i>The Christchurch Green Belt</i>	35
CHAPTER 5	44
THE CHRISTCHURCH GREEN BELT: HAS IT PASSED ITS USED BY DATE?.....	45
<i>The 1955 British Government Circular 42/55</i>	46
Reason 1: To check the further growth of the built up area.....	46
Reason 2: To prevent towns from merging into one another.....	52
Reason 3: To preserve the special character of a town.....	55
Review.....	59
THE CHRISTCHURCH GREEN BELT: IS IT A SUSTAINABLE CONCEPT?.....	61
<i>The Resource Management Act</i>	61
Reason 1: More efficient provision of public services (consolidation).....	64
Reason 2: Protecting the rural (agricultural) resource.....	68
Can the Green Belt be Saved? Options for the Future.....	72
CHAPTER 6	79
GREEN BELT ALTERNATIVES – PRESERVING RURAL LAND IN THE FACE OF URBANISATION.....	80
<i>Individual Will</i>	80
Gifts and Bequests.....	81
Covenants.....	83
<i>Government Intervention</i>	85
Outright Purchase and Acquisition.....	86
Public Purchase of Development Rights.....	87
<i>Economic Instruments</i>	91
Transfer of Development Rights.....	91
Charges and Levies.....	96
Subsidies and Environmental Compensation.....	99
Rate Relief.....	100
<i>Concluding Remarks</i>	101
CHAPTER 7	104
CONCLUSION.....	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY	108

Chapter 1

Introduction

In May 1999 the Christchurch City Council released its decisions on objections to the Proposed City Plan. The most notable of these decisions related to the issues surrounding urban growth. Decisions in the Plan provide residential potential for about 30,000 more people, this being considered enough to cope with the city's expected population growth to almost 320,000 by the year 2011 (Bruce, 1999). Of particular note, 650 hectares of land, much of it from green-belt areas, has been opened up for new residential development. While the pro-development lobby supports the decision to open up large tracts of the City's green belt, other sectors of the community are strongly critical. Despite reference to the term "green belt" in the City Plan, these decisions represent a departure from past planning practice and suggest that the green belt surrounding Christchurch City and its philosophy has begun to fade. This raises questions about the green belt's future.

The urban fringe¹ has always been recognised as a type of landscape with particular characteristics and problems. On the one hand, the areas around towns have traditionally provided the various resources vital to the functioning of the urban area. On the other, it has been the urban areas that have contained most of the potential direct and indirect users of those urban fringe resources. The value accorded to these resources (environmental, recreational, agricultural and infrastructural) may not be easily quantifiable, but their management always involves consideration of their economic as well as physical issues. The amenity spaces around towns are also valued by the users of urban areas for various reasons, including the aesthetic virtues of the countryside and its healthiness and tranquility (Evans & Mabbitt, 1997). Initiatives aimed at improving (or extending) the urban fringe have been traditionally influenced by this idealised Arcadian view of the countryside.

¹ The urban fringe is also known as the urban-rural fringe or peri-urban area. It is defined as the edge of the urban area or where town and country meet. However, in reality there is seldom a sudden change from town to country, and so in this research the term used (either peri-urban, urban-rural fringe or just urban fringe) signifies a zone in transition between the purely rural and purely urban areas.

The green belt has been one of the most enduring and widely supported planning instruments (Munton, 1983). Throughout the first half of this century professional planners and local politicians orchestrated a sustained and successful campaign in favour of a green belt around London, culminating in the 1950's in the first statutory green belt in Britain – the Metropolitan or London Green Belt. Just as this green belt was coming into existence central government published a circular in which it lent its support to the idea of green belts, a support that has not wavered over almost half of a century. The circular encouraged local authorities to include green belt proposals in their development plans, and many did so with alacrity. So why is support so widespread? The most plausible explanation arises from the flexibility of the concept and as a result the differing interpretations held of its purpose. The views of farmers, residents, district planners, councillors and government officials vary markedly and to a point where each group employs quite different measures of green belt performance. However, it can be argued that the ideas in support for green belts have always been imprecise and variable (Munton, 1983).

This is evident in Christchurch whereby the rationales for green belt existence are becoming more difficult to identify. In light of the diversity of views on the reasons for (and against) green belts, and the changing planning paradigms, this thesis examines the application of the concept to Christchurch City – New Zealand. This research aims to determine the rationale for the establishment of green belts by tracing the evolution of practice since its inception in both England and New Zealand. The history of the Christchurch green belt is examined and the application of green belt policy in the contemporary planning context is critically reviewed. On these grounds, this research considers the relevance of the green belt and its potential to continue as an effective planning tool in the 1990's.

Methodology and Outline

The first part of this study will examine the history of both the London and Christchurch Green belts. This will be an historical investigation to discover what initiated their use and how they fit in with today's planning and legislative agenda. In order to accomplish this, literature searches will concentrate on resources available in New Zealand including journal articles, news-releases and web sites. Planning journals and the press will also be important sources of information to help clarify some fact and gain some of the general feelings about the green belt and its value to people. Much of this will be published in the United Kingdom and will provide historical detail of the past and information about recent British thinking. It is also anticipated that the comments obtained from a variety of staff from differing organisations will assist in evaluating and investigating the Christchurch green belt's future.

Whilst browsing through the literature of green belts prior to the commencement of this research, it became apparent (whether right or wrong) that the city of London and the term 'green belt' go 'hand-in-hand.' In a similar context, London is often seen as the 'mother-city' for which other cities around the world have modelled their green belts on. It is therefore no surprise that the Christchurch green belt is, in part derived from the London experience. With some further literature searches, it is made clear that the purpose and reasons for establishing green belts (in England) are defined in a 1955 British Government Circular. Their reasons for the establishment of green belts (in London) are still relevant today.

Chapter 1 has already set the scene, by implying that the green belt philosophy in Christchurch has begun to fade. This fade is thought to be partly due to the ability and or desire of some people to live in the green belt. As a result, houses have been erected in a piecemeal fashion and large tracts of land have been subdivided into smaller lots. Ultimately the consequence is an encroachment onto the green belt land. **Chapter 2** of the study reviews definitions of the term 'green belt' and examines the history and thinking behind them. Various British town planning academics and practitioners have investigated and implemented these ideas over the years, and for this reason **Chapter 3**

places an emphasis on the British experience which determined the original purposes and functions and shows evidence of it working in a practical context. The London Metropolitan Green Belt is considered in some detail to illustrate the evolution of green belts. The history and application of the green belt concept in New Zealand (Christchurch) is then investigated in **Chapter 4** and recent criticisms regarding its effectiveness and relevance is considered in **Chapter 5**. In particular, this chapter compares the city of Christchurch to the 1955 British Government's reasons for establishing green belts. The Christchurch green belt is then applied to the workings of the *Resource Management Act* to determine its relevance and usefulness as a future planning tool. A variety of alternative planning techniques are examined in **Chapter 6**, all of which have similar objectives – that of restricting urban growth, preserving rural (agricultural) land, or both. **Chapter 7** contains the conclusion from the study and discusses their wider implications.