

TANK FARM

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M L Graham, Civic Trust Auckland Board Member

"Tank Farm" is the temporary, all encompassing name, given to a large block of land, comprising the major part of the Western Reclamation, to the north of Victoria Park, between Viaduct Harbour and the Westhaven Marina complex.

The Ports Authority reclaimed the land in stages from the late 1800's, over long periods of time, then subdivided it into a number of smaller holdings and leased them off under "Glasgow" type ground leases, typically providing 21 year terms, with renewals into perpetuity.

The sea bed which was reclaimed within this area and also to the south, including Victoria Park, seems to have come outside any of the original Maori land purchases from Ngati Whatua - but that is another story.

In the latter decades of the 20th century, under the scramble of privatisations which followed the adoption of Thatcherite economic policies by both major New Zealand parties, the Port Authority became privatised, after having been a separate trading arm of the Local Authority. Consequently, the land coming within the various reclamations on the northern fringe of the CBD went into shared ownership, between the Port Authority and Auckland City Council. Naturally, some of this ownership was cashed up and private investors took over (and have subsequently redeveloped) land immediately to the east of Viaduct Harbour and (as I understand it) are currently the owners (as Viaduct Harbour Holdings Ltd) of most of the southern portion of the Tank Farm, to a line centred approximately along Pakenham Street.

More recently, the Ports Authority has been purchased back, this time by the Auckland Regional Council, which is now essentially the owner of land within the Tank Farm north of Pakenham Street, subject to the various leasehold interests, which remain in place.

The various leases consequently represent a fragmentation of ownership, which will hinder the development of any overall planning concept for the locality and its eventual implementation.

Under a "Glasgow" type ground lease, the lessor essentially gives away forever any direct control over property development, which is passed to the lessee, subject to adherence to lease terms, Local and Regional Authority long term plans and other planning or development constraints.

The planning process in the locality is now developing some momentum.

Auckland City Council initially allowed a fairly narrow opportunity for the public (over a period of months ending in early May) to present their "wish list" of proposals for the redevelopment of the area.

The entire Tank Farm area has come to be seen by the public as a coherent land mass for comprehensive redevelopment, virtually as though it was (or could become) completely vacant.

The rights of sitting leasees appear to have been completely ignored in this initial process and the difficulties of planning in an area of fragmented property rights apparently, for the meantime, overlooked.

To their credit the Auckland Regional Council has commenced negotiating with some lessees over key areas, with a view to buying up some leases, so that there may be some full

freehold redevelopment opportunities available. This is a lengthy and expensive process, which can only be funded out of ground rental income, so that the Ports Authority itself can remain a viable economic entity and so that there is no onerous burden on tax payers.

Again, to its credit, the Auckland Regional Authority has commissioned a major planning report by an overseas firm, at a cost thought to be several million dollars, addressing possible development scenarios and, most importantly, traffic and public access issues. It is understood that this report has been made available to the Auckland City Council.

The Tank Farm overall is one of the biggest potential redevelopment sites being considered for comprehensive re-development in any city of this size within the southern hemisphere, involving property valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Hasty planning could be disastrous and every effort should be made to ensure that political entities involved do not inadvertently impose upon themselves overly short time scales.

The overwhelming public response so far and one which Civic Trust Auckland supports, is that there should be a major reserve area at the extreme northern area of the site and that public access to it and the waterfront perimeter, be either created or retained. Most importantly, there should be a public transport system, preferably a tramway, from Britomart into the heart of the Tank Farm, to allow any major public development on reserve or other land in the Tank Farm northern sector, to be commercial viable.

This is essential, as it would be virtually impossible for private motor vehicle access and carparking to be provided within the local area, as traffic and parking requirements, likely to be generated would be overwhelming.

Auckland city planners from the mid 1990s have tended to discourage public motor vehicle access to the CBD, by limiting car parking within new developments. Such a scenario will doom the CBD to development stagnation, unless public transport, both within the CBD and also to and from the outer suburbs is dramatically upgraded.

In this respect the Tank Farm redevelopment exercise is at the forefront of the main conundrum facing the City.

It is essentially a major heart bypass operation, for which it is important to ensure that the patient retains some form of effective pulse.