



Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood

P.O. Box 70001
Ranui
Waitakere City 0655

Phone 09 833 7784
Email robin.allison@earthsong.org.nz

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Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood, at 457 Swanson Road, Ranui, is a 32-home cohousing neighbourhood developed by residents through their non-profit company Cohousing New Zealand Ltd. Earthsong was established with the following vision:

“To establish a cohousing neighbourhood based on the principles of permaculture that will serve as a model of a socially and environmentally sustainable community.

Earthsong chose to locate in Waitakere City specifically because of Council's Eco City policies. The founders of Earthsong first had contact with Council in 1992. Its relationship with Council slowly developed over the planning and consenting stages and the first stage of construction, leading to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2003.

Memorandum of Understanding

The purpose of the MOU is to develop a stronger and ongoing relationship between Earthsong and Council. Council regards Earthsong as a leading example of an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable community in New Zealand and therefore is a key partner in relation to Council's strategic objectives, with a wealth of experience which supports and demonstrates Council's objectives.

The stated outcomes were that, through its relationship with Earthsong, Council wants to continue demonstrating today's and future practice for sustainable homes and communities. Council wants to draw from the Earthsong model to learn how to develop future neighbourhoods that demonstrate low environmental impact, are affordable, where people enjoy living and which have a sense of community. Earthsong wants to be a recognised provider of services, advice and expertise to further Council's Eco City directions, and for Council to recognise that role through easier access to the council's processes, information and resources.

Council's representatives involved in the relationship over the years have been Councillor Penny Hulse, John Dragicevich, Ann Magee, Tony Miguel, Andrew Pollock, Sue Bidrose and Lesley Jenkins .

Outcomes

Meetings: Regular MOU meetings have been held since 2003 attended by representatives of Earthsong and senior council staff, to review Earthsong's progress and remove any obstacles during the construction process by Council,



remain informed of any issues and opportunities of interest to either party, and plan joint work programmes.

Staff Tours: in 2003 approximately 500 Council staff had presentations on Earthsong followed by a tour of the neighbourhood as part of eco-city staff training. Council continues to refer individuals and groups with an interest in sustainability to Earthsong. Of particular interest in the early years were tours of Earthsong's overland stormwater system for local and international engineers.

Joint Monitoring Projects: Several joint venture monitoring projects have been undertaken, including monthly data collection of water use for one block of 7 houses, monthly testing of tank water quality, periodic testing of tank water for dissolved metals, the testing of the pond water quality, and an audit of construction waste for the construction of 7 houses which features on the council website.

Analysis of water, power, solid waste and transport data was undertaken in 2010 and several high quality reports have been produced. These compare Earthsong figures with average figures for the city and region, summarising specific reasons for the reduced resource use at Earthsong and giving pointers to actions that could be applied more widely.

Earthsong website.

One of the key methods of sharing information on sustainability in general and Earthsong in particular has been the extensive Earthsong website. WCC has maintained a link to the Earthsong website for a number of years, and staff regularly refer ratepayers and other enquirers to this website.

While the website has in the past been of high quality and very comprehensive, much of it has become out of date since the completion of the development period in 2008. In 2010 council contracted Robin Allison to write up detailed descriptions of many of Earthsong's systems and learnings from the whole development period, in order to upgrade the Earthsong website and make available the significant areas of the Earthsong experience that would contribute to knowledge of sustainability.

Earthsong Centre Trust

The third aim of the Earthsong vision is

“To assist in education and public awareness of sustainability by demonstrating and promoting innovative community design and environmentally responsible construction.”

In order to advance these educational aims, a charitable trust called the Earthsong Centre Trust was established in 2004, with trustees drawn from both unit owners of Earthsong and the wider community. The Earthsong Centre Trust manages the outreach and educational activities of the Earthsong neighbourhood, and in recognition of this, the large Earthsong community building is owned jointly by the Earthsong Centre Trust and the Earthsong Body Corporate.

Loan for the Earthsong Centre: In June 2005 Council made an interest-free loan of \$300,000 for 3 years to the Earthsong Centre Trust. This, together with a grant of \$203,000 from the ASB Trust, enabled the early construction of the Earthsong Centre, to serve as a venue for the demonstration of social and environmental sustainability on a neighbourhood level. The loan demonstrated Council's recognition of the benefits that the Earthsong Centre would bring to the people of Waitakere and greater Auckland. An extension to the loan period was agreed in May 2008, and the loan was fully repaid in 2009.

Council also made a contribution of \$10,000 towards the cost of installing a demonstration composting toilet adjacent to the Earthsong Centre, as a trial to determine the suitability of a composting toilet in a suburban area, and for potential use in parks and reserves.

Approximately 1000 people every year visit Earthsong on Open Days and specially arranged presentations and tours, and use Earthsong facilities for meetings, presentations and community events. Groups include Waitakere City Council, Auckland Regional Council's annual tours of 'Make a Difference' senior school pupils, a wide range of community organisations and groups, high school and tertiary institutions, planners, architects, engineers, developers, retired people's organisations, a number of Japanese City Councils, environmental groups, film crews and other media.

The Earthsong Centre Trust is currently preparing an educational activities action plan to ensure its activities provide opportunities for learning for sustainability not currently covered by other organisations, and based on Earthsong's learnings, experience and expertise.

Relationship with Auckland Council

Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood is a show-case for sympathetic low impact medium density urban design, and continues to attract strong media interest both nationally and internationally. It has featured in several books (most recently "A Deeper Shade of Green: Sustainable Urban Development, Building and Architecture in New Zealand", edited by Johann Bernhardt, Balasoglou Books, 2008, and "Pocket Neighbourhoods" by Ross Chapin, about to be published in the USA). Earthsong achieved international recognition in 2009 as a finalist in the World Habitat Awards, and was featured on National Radio in the "Ideas" segment of the Sunday morning programme with Chris Laidlaw on 29 August 2010.

Council officers and Earthsong representatives agree that Earthsong will continue to provide a regional, national and international example of an urban sustainability development, and that links with the new council will be of potential benefit to Auckland residents and staff of the new council.

Robin Allison
Chairperson, Earthsong Centre Trust
2 September 2010