

of high population density along public transport routes so more people are able to use them. Incentives could also be given to new industrial developments to ensure that they are near bus or train routes, or that they provide their own transport to them. And there are many other things that could be done to encourage the use of public services.

As operators of transport services too, local councils also have a role in ensuring that they are provided sustainably. Bus fleets powered by electricity have a far smaller effect than, say, diesel buses. CNG is another better fuel – some councils have recently been converting their bus fleets to run on it. The Auckland Regional Council, for example, has done this at a cost of about \$8,000 per bus and expects both to make a profit as well as to run them more cleanly. The technology for using hydrogen made from water as a fuel is also available.

Local councils also have a significant role to play in recycling schemes. New Zealanders produce, on average, about two-thirds of a tonne of waste per year, which is then just taken away to the tip and buried – a huge waste of resources when a considerable part of it can be recycled. Glass, paper, plastic, aluminium and ferrous metals can all be recycled, if not actually used again without reprocessing, and all organic waste can be composted. Estimates of the proportion that can be reclaimed vary but more than 50 percent is probably achievable for domestic refuse and something less than this for industrial waste. This represents a very worthwhile resource which can be created without further use of raw materials.

Local councils, of course, as the bodies responsible for waste collection and operation of landfill sites themselves, can do a great deal towards the encouragement of better recycling. Very few councils in New Zealand have accepted this responsibility and, in those that have, the schemes they chose to operate have generally failed – either through a lack of commitment or a lack of planning. However, failure is not inevitable. A number of councils in Australia are operating successful long-running schemes and are even making a profit in the process.

A linked issue is the methane formed in landfill sites and sewage farms by breakdown of the organic matter dumped in them. Methane is one of the most active greenhouse gases with an effect some 30 to 40 times that of carbon dioxide, and volumes are produced every day from these sites. Some councils, in fact, have a serious problem from the sheer amount of gas that is produced, so much that there is a real danger of explosions. In the interests of safety as well as sustainability, the gas needs to be trapped.

Methane can also be burnt as a fuel – it is actually the main constituent of CNG – and we can therefore produce both energy and convert it to carbon dioxide at the same time. Although the carbon dioxide is still a greenhouse gas, it is not nearly so effective and so the demands of sustainability are satisfied on two counts. By using it as a fuel, we are able to avoid using up other, non-renewable, energy resources and also have less effect on global warming.

Several local councils in New Zealand, Christchurch for example, are already using landfill methane to power heating boilers,

council vehicles and so on. Others are looking at doing so, such as Wellington with their new sewage plant, but many more could be and should be. The technology is very simple – where gas bubbles off at sewage plants and landfill sites, bores are sunk into the ground. All that is then necessary is some sort of collection and storage system and that's it – the gas can be used as and where it is needed, providing a good cost-saving as well as a resource.

This article has touched on just a few of the areas in which local and regional councils can have an impact on sustainability – there are of course many more, probably as many as there are areas in which they operate. Energy management and the promotion of energy efficiency, land restoration, recycling and waste reduction, and a number of others are all issues that councils can have an effect on. And let's not forget their economic power and the way they can use it to encourage local industry and others to adopt sustainability – perhaps by setting an example themselves!

### Aesthetic Values

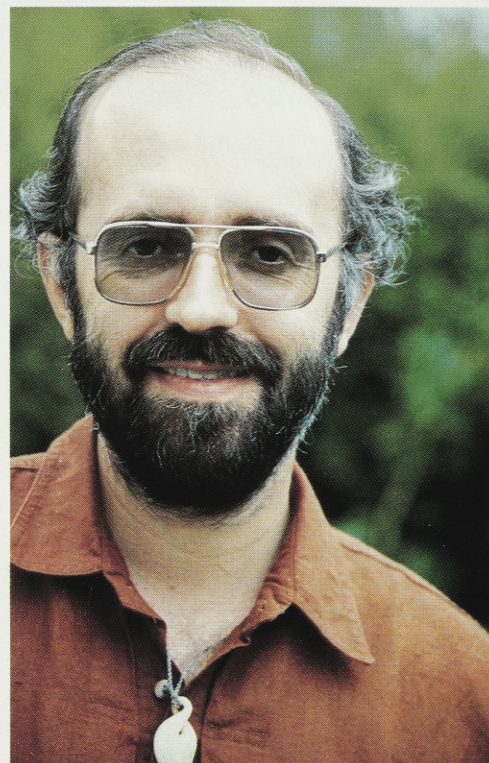
There is one area, though, that is not often considered and it has to do with the attractiveness of the cities that many of us live in. Aesthetic values are obviously less important than issues that affect the state of the earth and whether we can live on it at all. However, our personal environment is an important one if we are to stay living in cities and the centres of most of them are fast becoming deserts as far as people are concerned. A visit to the central business districts of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch shows how little they have been treated as places for people by developers.

The Terrace in Wellington, for example, has become a sunless canyon with high-rise buildings down its entire length with very little to commend it at all. The beauty and history of buildings such as His Majesty's in Auckland have been lost – and it's still happening. Plans have been published for a redevelopment on the site of the MLC Building in Wellington, a beautiful example of a style that will soon go forever – and so the list goes on.

Some councils, of course, have recognised this and made sure that central city parks and open spaces have been kept; others have ensured that buildings are retained for their aesthetic values – Napier, for example, with its Art Deco buildings. Many others have done none of these things and we are the worse for it. Sustainability covers all our needs and the need to enjoy our surroundings is as profound as any other. Aesthetic values have a tremendous importance in our lives and if we are unable to love and feel content in our environment, we will have very little urge to do anything about the wider concerns around us.

Local and regional governments have, then, a significant power to promote sustainability – but the question is still whether they will. A quick look at the make-up of most councils, particularly regional ones, shows that they consist of mainly men, mainly older men with a history of successful business life – the “grey hair, grey suit” brigade as a friend of mine puts it – precisely the people least likely to respond to the needs of sustainability. And this is going to be a problem if we want seriously to start dealing with the problems of sustainability. Political will is the crucial question, no matter what current legislation dictates.

Local authorities have to start showing this will – and we can all play a part in persuading them to do so. Start letting them know what you expect from them; phone and write letters to your councillors and ensure that they know where your vote goes; write submissions on issues that come up; and so on. (The new RMLR Act will probably help here as it is expected to make it easier for people to propose changes to the District Scheme). Eventually councillors will start to listen, even if it's only because their votes are being threatened, and then we can really start! 🐦



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