WRC Submission

Submission to Waikato Regional Council

To: Warren Maher, Chair, Waikato Regional Council

From: BHERG – Beach, Harbour & Estuary Restoration Group, Whangamatā Ratepayers Association Inc., and the Whangamatā Combined Community Group

Subject: Request for the Development and Implementation of a Moana Anu Anu Catchment Management Plan

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Background

This submission follows and builds upon the detailed submissions made during the Waikato Regional Coastal Plan Review process by Submitter No. 29, being the Whangamatā Ratepayers Association Inc. and the Whangamatā Combined Community Group. These submissions were presented to Waikato Regional Council on 14 November 2023, together with supplementary submissions and verbal presentations made during the hearing process.

The recommendations arising from the Commissioners' Report and the subsequent progression of the Regional Coastal Plan Review provide an opportunity to advance practical catchment management solutions for the Moana Anu Anu Estuary and Wentworth River catchment.

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1. Purpose of this Submission

BHERG, the Whangamatā Ratepayers Association and the wider Whangamatā Combined Community Group seek the support and leadership of Waikato Regional Council (WRC) to develop and implement a Moana Anu Anu Catchment Management Plan.

The principal objective of the plan is to restore and maintain the natural and engineered drainage capacity of the Moana Anu Anu catchment by managing sediment and vegetation, including mangroves where they are demonstrably restricting water flow and increasing flood risk.

The purpose of the proposed plan is to:

- Improve stormwater conveyance through the Moana Anu Anu catchment.
- Reduce flood retention and prolonged ponding across the Titoki Golf Course and adjoining areas.

- Improve the discharge capacity of the Wentworth River and associated drainage channels.
- Restore efficient water movement between the upper catchment, estuary, harbour and ocean.
- Establish an ongoing management programme rather than relying on reactive interventions after flooding events occur.

We request that WRC work collaboratively with BHERG, the Whangamatā Ratepayers Association, Harbour Care, the Titoki Golf Club, affected landowners and other community organisations to develop and implement this plan.

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2. The Issue

The Moana Anu Anu Estuary forms a critical component of the wider Whangamatā Harbour system and serves as a major drainage pathway for stormwater originating from the Wentworth River catchment and surrounding low-lying areas.

The Wentworth River drains a catchment of approximately 25.25 km², while the Okauanga Stream contributes additional flows from a catchment of approximately 1.93 km².

During significant rainfall events, runoff from the surrounding hills and upper catchment rapidly enters the Wentworth River. As river levels rise, water can overtop riverbanks and move across adjoining land before entering the drainage network, Moana Anu Anu Estuary, Whangamatā Harbour and ultimately the sea.

The ability of this system to safely convey floodwaters depends on maintaining adequate hydraulic capacity throughout the entire drainage pathway.

Over time, sediment accumulation and vegetation growth have altered parts of the estuary and drainage network. Where these changes restrict water movement, they can reduce drainage efficiency, increase flood retention and contribute to inundation risks affecting adjoining land, infrastructure and property.

This is not solely an environmental management issue. It is also a flood mitigation, stormwater management and community resilience issue.

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3. Historical Context

The Wentworth River was diverted prior to the 1940s as development expanded within the Whangamatā area, particularly around the Ōtahu locality.

Subsequent farming, forestry and settlement activities within the catchment increased sediment transport through the river system and into the lower estuary.

As sediment accumulated within the estuary environment, mangrove colonisation expanded. Over several decades this process has significantly altered parts of the harbour and estuary system.

Current estimates indicate that approximately 104 hectares of the wider harbour are now occupied by mangroves within a total harbour area of approximately 434 hectares.

These changes have resulted in ongoing community concern regarding:

- Reduced open water areas.
- Altered estuary function.
- Increased sediment accumulation.
- Restricted drainage pathways.
- Increased flood risk.

For many years the Whangamatā community has worked alongside WRC through:

- Monitoring programmes.
- Mangrove and vegetation management initiatives.
- Seedling removal programmes.
- Environmental sampling.
- Physical clearance projects.
- Disposal of cleared vegetation.
- Community-based environmental restoration activities.

This long history demonstrates both the commitment and capability of the community to work constructively alongside Waikato Regional Council.

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4. Opportunity Created Through the Regional Coastal Plan Review

The Regional Coastal Plan Review process has created an important opportunity to move from consultation and policy development to practical implementation.

The Whangamatā Ratepayers Association and Combined Community Group made detailed submissions during the review process seeking improved management of the Moana Anu Anu Estuary and wider harbour environment.

The Commissioners' recommendations, together with the resolution of relevant appeals, have helped establish a more enabling framework for vegetation management and estuary restoration activities.

Importantly, following proceedings involving Waikato Regional Council and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, the Environment Court granted a resource consent

authorising harbour management activities for a period extending from 12 May 2012 until 12 May 2037.

The existence of this consent, combined with the outcomes of the Coastal Plan Review process, provides a practical pathway for progressing catchment management initiatives.

The key questions now become:

- What work should be undertaken?
- Who should undertake it?
- How will it be funded?
- When can implementation commence?

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5. Flood Mitigation and Catchment Management

The community is increasingly concerned about flood risk and the responsibility of public authorities to appropriately manage known hazards.

Previous engineering investigations and flood assessments have identified inundation risks within parts of the wider catchment. Climate change projections indicate that rainfall intensity and extreme weather events are likely to increase in the future.

For this reason, the Moana Anu Anu system should be managed as an integrated catchment rather than as a series of separate components.

The drainage pathway should be considered as:

Upper Catchment → Wentworth River → Titoki Golf Course → Drainage Channel → Moana Anu Anu Estuary → Whangamatā Harbour → Ocean

The performance of the overall system is limited by its most constrained section. Improving one part of the network while allowing restrictions to develop elsewhere does not provide a sustainable long-term solution.

Accordingly, we request that WRC undertake an integrated assessment of the entire drainage pathway and identify the works necessary to maximise the safe and efficient movement of floodwaters.

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6. Requested Actions

We recognise that vegetation management must be undertaken in accordance with environmental legislation, resource consent requirements and best-practice ecological management principles.

However, environmental regulation should not become a barrier to practical flood mitigation and catchment management where evidence demonstrates that intervention is required.

We therefore request that Waikato Regional Council:

1. Initiate a formal Moana Anu Anu Catchment Management Plan.
2. Review the existing resource consent and associated management provisions applying to vegetation and mangrove management through to 12 May 2037.
3. Identify priority locations where vegetation and sediment accumulation are reducing drainage efficiency or contributing to flood retention.
4. Assess the relationship between vegetation management and flood levels affecting the Titoki Golf Course, adjoining residential areas, industrial land and the Wentworth River corridor.
5. Develop an environmentally responsible management programme focused on restoring and maintaining appropriate water-flow capacity.
6. Identify funding requirements for both initial works and ongoing maintenance.
7. Consider an appropriate combination of contractors, council resources and trained community volunteers.
8. Establish a monitoring and maintenance programme to ensure long-term effectiveness.
9. Include funding for priority works within future Annual Plans and Long-Term Plans, or bring forward works where practical.

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7. Partnership with the Community

Whangamatā has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to contribute constructively to environmental restoration and harbour management initiatives.

BHERG, the Whangamatā Ratepayers Association and other local organisations possess considerable knowledge of the harbour, estuary, waterways and historical management activities.

The community is prepared to assist through:

- Local knowledge and historical records.
- Identification of priority areas.
- Community liaison and communication.
- Environmental monitoring.
- Volunteer support where appropriate.
- Engagement with affected landowners and stakeholders.

We believe this represents an ideal opportunity for Waikato Regional Council and the Whangamatā community to work collaboratively toward shared objectives.

WRC has the statutory responsibility, regulatory authority and technical expertise. The community brings local knowledge, commitment and practical experience.

Together, these resources can deliver a more effective and sustainable outcome.

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8. Environmental Considerations

We recognise that the Moana Anu Anu Estuary and Whangamatā Harbour provide important ecological, recreational and cultural values.

This submission does not advocate the wholesale removal of mangroves or vegetation throughout the harbour.

Rather, it seeks the strategic management of vegetation and sediment where they are demonstrably restricting drainage capacity, increasing flood risk or impairing the functioning of natural and engineered water conveyance systems.

The desired outcome is a balanced approach that supports:

- Flood mitigation.
- Efficient stormwater conveyance.
- Water quality improvement.
- Biodiversity protection.
- Fish passage.
- Long-term ecological health.
- Sustainable harbour and estuary management.

Environmental protection and flood management should be viewed as complementary objectives rather than competing interests.

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9. Why Action Is Needed Now

There is a strong case for progressing this work without further delay.

The community has raised concerns for many years.

The harbour and estuary have undergone substantial change through sediment accumulation and vegetation expansion.

Previous investigations have identified flood-related risks.

The Regional Coastal Plan Review has created a more enabling policy framework.

A current resource consent provides a regulatory pathway through to 2037.

Community organisations remain willing to participate and assist.

At the same time, climate change is increasing the likelihood of more frequent and intense rainfall events.

The cost of proactive management is likely to be significantly less than the economic and social costs associated with repeated flooding, infrastructure damage, property impacts and emergency response activities.

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10. Requested Resolution

We respectfully request that Waikato Regional Council resolve to:

1. Support the development of a Moana Anu Anu Catchment Management Plan in partnership with BHERG, the Whangamatā Ratepayers Association, Harbour Care, the Titoki Golf Club, affected landowners and other relevant organisations.
2. Direct WRC staff to review the existing resource consent framework and identify the practical and regulatory requirements necessary to commence vegetation and sediment management activities.
3. Develop a staged programme of vegetation and sediment management, prioritising locations that provide the greatest flood mitigation and stormwater management benefits.
4. Identify funding requirements and include the programme within future Annual Plans and Long-Term Plans, with priority works advanced where possible.
5. Establish a working group comprising WRC representatives and community stakeholders to assist in programme development and implementation.
6. Report back to the community regarding programme scope, funding, consenting requirements, priorities and anticipated commencement dates.

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11. Conclusion

The Moana Anu Anu Estuary is a critical component of Whangamatā's stormwater, flood management and harbour system.

The community has spent many years identifying issues, participating in consultation processes, gathering information and supporting management initiatives.

We now respectfully request that Waikato Regional Council demonstrate leadership by initiating a Moana Anu Anu Catchment Management Plan and establishing a funded programme of vegetation and sediment management that delivers measurable improvements in stormwater conveyance, flood mitigation and environmental outcomes.

We are not seeking to diminish the ecological values of the estuary. Rather, we seek a balanced and evidence-based approach that restores effective water movement while protecting the environmental qualities that make the harbour and estuary important.

Whangamatā is ready to work in partnership with Waikato Regional Council.

We now ask Waikato Regional Council to work with us to turn that commitment into action.

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Submitted by:
Terry Walker
Chair

On behalf of:
BHERG – Beach, Harbour & Estuary Restoration Group
Whangamatā Ratepayers Association Inc.
Whangamatā Combined Community Group