

Comments on FTA231: Ōhoka Residential Subdivision

File reference: FTAA-2606-1253

Applicant: Carter Group Limited

Commenters: Jeremy David Seay and Jessica Nicole Mary Seay

Property: [REDACTED]

Introduction

We are the owners and residents of [REDACTED], and we oppose the proposed Ōhoka Residential Subdivision.

We understand the proposal seeks approval for approximately 879 residential allotments, a local centre, a retirement village, a polo field and associated infrastructure on land adjoining the existing Ōhoka settlement.

We are not opposed to housing development generally. Our concern is that this proposal is fundamentally the wrong scale and intensity for this location. It would permanently alter the rural environment, community character, amenity and infrastructure of Ōhoka.

Our comments focus on matters we have direct experience of as residents:

- flooding and groundwater;
- traffic and road safety;
- construction effects on our home;
- the effects on Ōhoka School and its students;
- rural character and the night-time environment; and
- the planning history of this site.

Many of our concerns relate to permanent effects that cannot simply be engineered, landscaped or managed away. Once development of this scale occurs, the character and experience of living in Ōhoka will have changed irreversibly.

Previous independent planning decisions

A matter we ask the Panel to give significant weight to is the planning history of this site.

This is not a new development proposal being considered for the first time. The same site has been the subject of two previous planning processes in which independent commissioners recommended that the development not proceed.

First, the development was promoted through Private Plan Change 31, also known as RCP031. Following a full hearing process, independent commissioners recommended that the proposal be declined. Waimakariri District Council adopted that recommendation and formally declined the plan change in November 2023.

Secondly, development of the site was considered again through the Waimakariri District Plan process. Independent commissioners again recommended against development of the site. Public reporting recorded concerns about the suitability of the location, transport connectivity, and the absence of a demonstrated need for housing in this particular location. It also recorded that sufficient development capacity was available elsewhere in the District.

We acknowledge that the Fast-track process operates under a different statutory framework and that the Panel must make its own assessment. However, we respectfully submit that it should not be enough that the proposal is now before a different decision-maker.

What has materially changed since two previous independent processes concluded that development of this site should not proceed?

In our view, the applicant should clearly demonstrate why the concerns identified through those earlier processes no longer apply. Revised plans and further technical reports do not necessarily resolve the fundamental question of whether urban development of this scale and intensity is appropriate at Ōhoka.

We do not believe the Fast-track pathway should be used simply to achieve a different outcome from development that failed to persuade independent commissioners through established planning processes.

Flooding, groundwater and lessons from Silverstream

Flooding and groundwater are among our greatest concerns.

Anyone who lives in Ōhoka knows that this is an area with high groundwater levels, poorly draining soils and frequent areas of surface ponding during wet periods. These are not abstract planning concepts. They are conditions we regularly observe in the local environment.

The applicant has provided updated flood, groundwater and stormwater assessments. We acknowledge that substantial technical work has been undertaken. However, our concern is not that the modelling must necessarily be wrong. Our concern is what happens if it is.

This concern is influenced by our own personal experience as homeowners in the Silverstream Estates subdivision in Kaiapoi. In 2016 it became publicly known that flood-level information used during the development of Silverstream was incorrect. Public reporting stated that resource consent had been granted based on faulty flood-level data and that up to 300 homes were affected, ours included. The issue was discovered only after development had occurred.

Reporting further noted that the issue was identified by chance by a builder's surveyor and that Waimakariri District Council commissioned further investigation to determine the extent of the problem.

For us, this was not simply a technical issue. As homeowners at Silverstream, we experienced the uncertainty, stress and financial consequences that followed. We experienced concerns regarding flood protection, future saleability and the value of our property.

The issue materially affected us. We experienced significant uncertainty regarding the future value and saleability of our property, and one attempted sale did not proceed during that period.

We are not suggesting the same outcome will necessarily occur at Ōhoka. However, the experience taught us that:

- Flood modelling is not infallible
- Survey datums and benchmarks can be wrong
- Important assumptions can change
- Significant issues are not always identified before development proceeds
- The consequences are ultimately borne by homeowners
- That experience fundamentally influences how we view the current proposal.

Because of what happened at Silverstream, we are uncomfortable with an approach that relies on resolving material uncertainty later through detailed design, subdivision approvals, management plans or monitoring programmes.

Monitoring after development has begun does not undo construction that has already taken place. Nor does technical reassessment remove the stress, uncertainty or financial consequences experienced by affected homeowners.

We ask the Panel to ensure that any uncertainty relating to flooding, groundwater, finished ground levels and stormwater performance is resolved before development is approved, rather than after.

Traffic and road safety

Traffic is another significant concern.

Ōhoka's roads currently function as rural roads. They are used by residents, commuters, cyclists, horse riders, agricultural vehicles and children travelling to and from school.

Many local roads have limited shoulders and little or no dedicated pedestrian infrastructure. This means children, pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders frequently share the same road corridor as vehicles, with limited physical separation.

The relative safety of this environment currently depends heavily on lower traffic volumes and considerate driver behaviour. The proposed development would introduce substantially more commuter, household, service and construction traffic onto a network that already provides limited protection for vulnerable road users.

Ōhoka also has very limited local employment opportunities. There are only a small number of local employers, including Ōhoka School, WaterForce and the local service station. Most residents travel to Rangiora, Kaiapoi, Christchurch or other centres for work and services.

Given the lack of meaningful public transport, we expect the majority of residents within the proposed development would depend heavily on private vehicles for work, secondary education, healthcare, shopping and other everyday activities. This would create significant ongoing traffic movements, place additional pressure on the surrounding rural road network, and reinforce our concerns about the suitability of this location for development at the scale proposed.

Our concerns include:

- substantially increased traffic volumes;
- increased road noise;
- danger to children walking and cycling;
- horse riders sharing local roads with increased traffic;
- congestion around Ōhoka, including the existing school;
- construction traffic and heavy vehicles; and
- the continuing absence of a meaningful public-transport alternative.

The transport effects of development on this site have already been raised through previous planning processes. We submit that these concerns remain directly relevant.

Ōhoka School and student safety

Our family has a strong personal connection to Ōhoka School. The school and its character as a small rural school were among the reasons we chose to live in this community.

We acknowledge that the development plans identify land that could potentially accommodate a future school. However, this is not currently an approved or committed Ministry of Education project.

The Ōhoka School Board reports (attached) that the applicant's consultation material provides no binding guarantee that the land will be acquired for a school or that a new school will be funded or delivered. The report states that the land could instead be used for a retirement village.

We therefore do not consider it appropriate to assume that provision for a possible school site resolves the effects of the development on the existing school. The proposal should be assessed on the basis of confirmed infrastructure, not infrastructure that may or may not eventuate.

The Ōhoka School Board has prepared the attached Ōhoka School Infrastructure and Traffic Impact Assessment. We understand the Board was not invited to provide comments directly to the Panel. We are therefore attaching its report to ensure the Panel has the opportunity to consider the School Board's evidence and concerns.

The report raises significant concerns about:

- the existing school's physical capacity;
- current parking and congestion;
- student safety;
- the lack of safe walking and cycling infrastructure;
- the absence of confirmed educational infrastructure for the proposed development; and
- gaps identified in the assessment of school-related traffic effects.

The School Board report provides evidence of the pressures and safety concerns already being experienced by engaged school families.

The Board also states that it could not identify a specific safety or capacity assessment of the Mill Road and Jacksons Road intersection in the applicant's transport assessment, despite that intersection providing the primary route to the school. It further records that an extension of the Mill Road shared path between Whites Road and the school is planned but not funded.

Regardless of whether a future school is ultimately established, the development would create substantially more traffic and could involve sustained construction activity on roads used by children travelling to and from Ōhoka School.

For us, the issue is not only school capacity. It is also the safety and day-to-day experience of children and families in this community and the permanent change to a school that has served as the heart of rural Ōhoka for generations.

We support and rely on the concerns raised in the attached School Board report.

Construction effects on our home

Construction effects are likely to affect us more directly than many other residents.

Unlike many rural properties in the area, our house sits very close to Whites Road. This means road works, construction traffic, heavy-vehicle movements and earthworks associated with the development are likely to have a direct and significant effect on our day-to-day living environment.

We anticipate effects including:

- frequent heavy-vehicle movements close to our house;
- dust generation and deposition on our home and property;
- increased noise;
- ground vibration;
- road works immediately adjacent to our property;
- reduced enjoyment of our outdoor living areas;
- disruption to sleep, wellbeing and family life;
- reduced safety when entering and leaving our property; and
- a significant change to our current living environment.

These effects would not occur only for a matter of weeks or months. A development of approximately 879 allotments, together with roads, earthworks and associated infrastructure, is likely to involve sustained construction activity over many years.

While construction effects may be described as temporary in planning terms, prolonged disruption can represent a significant loss of residential amenity for people living closest to the affected roads.

For us, this is a significant direct effect of the proposal. Our home's proximity to Whites Road means we cannot simply retreat further from the noise, dust, vibration and traffic.

Management plans may control aspects of construction, but they cannot remove the reality that we would live beside a major development and construction route for an extended period of several years.

Rural character, community and the night sky

We moved to Ōhoka because it is a quiet rural community.

The character of the area is defined not only by its appearance, but also by the way people live here. We value:

- open rural outlooks;
- low traffic volumes;
- quiet roads;
- the ability to walk, cycle and ride horses;
- a strong sense of local community;
- a small rural school;
- quiet evenings;
- dark night skies; and
- a slower, less urban lifestyle.

The proposal would fundamentally change the scale of the settlement and the experience of living here.

Landscaping and urban-design treatments may reduce some visual effects, but they cannot conceal or reverse the development's population, density, traffic, noise and level of activity.

The effect on the night-time environment is particularly important to us. Ōhoka currently benefits from a comparatively dark rural night sky, with limited street lighting and lower levels of surrounding artificial light.

A development of this scale would introduce street lighting, household lighting, vehicle headlights, commercial lighting and lighting associated with community and recreational facilities. Even where individual lights meet technical standards, their cumulative effect would permanently change the darkness, tranquillity and rural character of the area at night.

Light-spill controls may reduce some direct glare, but they cannot recreate the dark rural environment that exists now. This is an example of an effect that cannot simply be engineered away once urban development has occurred.

Similarly, noise standards may regulate individual activities, but they cannot maintain the existing quietness of the area after nearly 900 additional households and associated vehicle movements are introduced.

We acknowledge that there may be forms of development that could be accommodated more sensitively within the wider Ōhoka environment. Development patterns reflecting the larger section sizes and lower-intensity character of nearby rural-residential subdivisions would have fundamentally different effects on traffic, infrastructure demand, lighting, noise and rural character.

The proposal before the Panel is not of that nature. Its scale and intensity would transform Ōhoka from a rural settlement into a substantially more urbanised environment.

Relief sought

For the reasons outlined above, we respectfully request that the Panel decline the application.

We do not seek approval subject to conditions. Our concern is that the proposal's fundamental scale, density and location would create permanent effects that conditions cannot adequately avoid or reverse.

Conditions may manage aspects of engineering design, construction practice or infrastructure operation. They cannot preserve the existing scale of the community, its rural character, dark night sky, quiet environment, low traffic volumes or the existing character of Ōhoka School once development of this magnitude occurs.

Our opposition is therefore to the proposal itself, rather than to particular aspects that we believe could be resolved through conditions.

Conclusion

We recognise the need for housing and understand that development can provide benefits.

However, independent commissioners have previously concluded that sufficient development capacity exists elsewhere within the District and that a specific need for housing in this location had not been demonstrated.

We do not consider the question before the Panel to be whether Waimakariri needs additional housing in general. The question is whether Ōhoka is an appropriate location for development of this scale and intensity when other land has already been identified for growth within the District Plan framework.

In our view, it is not.

This proposal would permanently change the scale, character and environment of Ōhoka. It would introduce a predominantly vehicle-dependent urban population into a rural settlement with limited employment, services, public transport and active-transport infrastructure.

The same site has already been considered through two planning processes in which independent commissioners recommended that development should not proceed. The current application should clearly demonstrate why those findings no longer apply.

Our personal experience at Silverstream Estates has shown us that flood-related data and assumptions can prove incorrect and that the consequences are borne by homeowners. Our own property was affected, and we experienced those consequences directly.

Our home's location close to Whites Road also means we would experience construction traffic, noise, dust, vibration and road works more directly than residents whose homes are situated further from the road.

The attached Ōhoka School Infrastructure and Traffic Impact Assessment also demonstrates that the existing school and surrounding road network are already experiencing capacity and safety pressures, while the possible future school identified in the application remains unconfirmed.

Once development of this scale occurs, the loss of rural character, darkness, quietness and community scale cannot realistically be reversed or engineered away.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask the Panel to decline the application.

Jeremy & Jessica Seay