

**November 2012**

**Notes from visits to cohousing projects**

**1) Earthsong**

**Meeting with David Williams, member of Earthsong eco neighbourhood**

- Earthsong is a co-housing neighbourhood based on permaculture principles which was initiated by a group formed about 17 years ago to look for land. They originally wanted to set up an eco village on rural land, but then found the present site, an old organic orchard, in the suburb of Ranui in West Auckland which met their requirements of being affordable, not polluted, and close to public transport. The land has four acres of housing, with one acre at the front which is separate and could be used in future for small businesses.
- The land was initially purchased by a company that was set up with 2 directors, and an indemnity document so that all the group shared the risk rather than just the two named directors. The company employed a developer.
- An ex councillor Helen Haslem helped them set up an MoU with the Waitakere City Council, now being updated to an MoU with Auckland Council, to facilitate the working relationships between the two entities. She took all the Council staff out to visit the site which resulted in a big shift in Council mindset and a culture of working together. Earthsong did a pilot study where they weighed all the waste and demonstrated how it could be minimised. Council made some concessions, such as allowing composting toilets, and allowing collection of rain water for showers and laundry but required reticulated water for drinking.
- Earthsong is resident driven, and is a [unit title](#) development. Each person owns their own house, with a small area of private land at one side, and the kitchen facing the common land side, and has a share in the common land and the communal house. The bank was nervous about lending money, and wanted the first houses to be presold, but didn't require houses to be presold in the future stages.
- There are 32 units (two 4 bedroom, the rest 3 or 2 bedroom) including two blocks with 4 flats in each. The houses are constructed from rammed earth and untreated timber with passive solar heating, and cost about \$500K. They are not cheap to build, but are cheap to operate, and include shared services including internet access. There is one driveway and a common parking area – this makes it safer and cleaner, and means minimum space is taken up by roadways.
- At present there are sixty members, many in their 50's, but not many in the 30-40 age group. Ten residents are over 65, and there are ten children. They are looking at ways to assist young families into buy in – at present many of the young families rent houses. Buyers can take out mortgages – the original members used [Prometheus](#). Valuation was a problem at the beginning, as regular valuers don't know how to value the share in the common land and facilities.
- Houses are sold on the open market, but buyers first have to join as members, and sign up to the members' agreement. This includes agreeing to the consensus decision making process, using a system of cards. If consensus can't be reached (which happens seldom if ever) and a decision has to go to a vote, a majority of 75% of owners is needed, renters having no vote.
- There are optional community meals twice a week – each person is rostered on with a team to cook and clean up once a month. Generally around 40 people come to community meals.

**2) Braemar**

**Meeting with Lindsay Wood – founding member of Braemar eco village, Nelson**

- The original group set up a company to develop the land, with each family/unit holding one share (one family had two), with the shareholding linked to the dollar value of the site. This was changed to two shares per living site. The total area is eleven acres (4.3 ha) with nine freehold sites, plus common areas. The common land is linked to each section, and sections can't be sold without their share of the common land. There are some old institutional buildings on the site on the common land.

- When it came to allocation the sites, the families who were renting old houses opted to stay in them, and the rest was done by secret preference which resulted in only one site needing to be further negotiated.
- The group paid a consultant \$100K to develop the plans. The subdivisions required a resource consent, and they say that while the council talked the talk, they didn't walk the talk. For example, encouraged by council they developed a water disposal plan which cost \$30K, only to have it turned down by council. They are not allowed to treat their sewerage on site, or to collect their own water, and once there were more than two sites on the existing farm road, the road had to be upgraded to subdivision standard. When services were being put in, they went across 30-40 existing service lines which was a legacy of the past when there were no regulations on the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Education, MoW, MoE, and the Hospital when they put in service lines.
- The group are all professional people and learned as they went along. They stressed the need for a project coordinator who knows the council, the requirements and can work across-discipline. They also stressed the need for good advice about how the ownership structure will work for example with GST registration.
- To start with, a development company, Braemar Village Ltd, was set up with 2 directors. This is now being closed off to close off the liability from what's already been done from future members. A new company is being set up to manage the village. At present the paid workers are the Project Manager, the accountant and the Operations Manager.
- The start-up capital was the tender price for the property plus extra for working capital. For the first 2 years there was no development work done, and they used WOOFERS to maintain the existing buildings at a cost of about \$40K. Now income from renting the existing properties covers maintenance.
- At present they are rated on the whole property, but when the titles are issued each will pay their own rates, raising the question of or whether the titles are rated on their value including their share of the common land, and if not, then who pays the rates on the common land.
- For the common land, the council wants to liaise with a single entity, not all the tenants in common of the shared land, so they set up another company which leases the common land from the tenants, and which deals with the Council over the common land. At present they're grappling with how to manage the common land, and what to use it for.
- Sections cost the going rate of \$150K - \$200K plus a share of the common assets valued at about \$100K, so it costs \$250K - \$300K to buy a section (before building a house). Sections are harder to sell than normal sections because of the responsibility for the wider asset, and things like having to take rubbish to village entrance.
- At present there is a mix of families, with fourteen adults and seven children. They realise that the cost of buying a section and building a house on it is not affordable for most young families, and are looking at ways young families can be assisted into the village to achieve their aim of being inter-generational.
- They plan to generate their own power which can be sold between members before it's sold to the grid, using a common power entry with check meters on each property, similar to a commercial building with many tenants.

### **3) Atamai**

#### **Meeting with Jack Santa Barbara, founder member of Atami eco village in the Motueka valley**

- Atamai is an eco village prioritising food security, good shelter, water, and low tech energy.
- The developer is Atamai Land Trust which bought and is developing the land. It makes all the decisions about development, and will be dissolved when the development work is complete.
- Atamai Development Ltd is a Consulting Company with 3 directors, and was established to implement the development of the subdivision. This is not-for-profit, so any profits made go back to the community. The Trustees of the Land Trust, and the directors of Atamai Development are all committed villagers and provided start-up financing as well as volunteering their time.
- The Atamai Village Council, also an incorporated society, owns, manages and makes decisions about the commons.
- Three sections were purchased from an original subdivision – these were large areas with the right for further subdivision. The area is 110 ha with a forestry block and a farm block. They

have approval for forty individual titles, each with a share of the common land as part of the title. The titles have several covenants including that nothing can be done that's not bio-certifiable, and that buildings need to have passive heating and their own water supply. There are also social covenants to do with consensus decision making and conflict resolution.

- Stage 1 has twelve titles, each 5000 square metres (just over an acre, with some still to be opened up and sold. At present there are ten families, living fairly spread out. Work is starting on stage 2, which is another twenty seven titles, which Council is allowing to be smaller than 5000 square metres. This stage will include the village centre. The third stage with the communal buildings will come later.
- The vision is for a traditional village based on permaculture principles. The houses in the "village" will each have a small garden. Some of the common land could be rented for a livelihood like an orchard. The village will be a car-free zone with a bicycle path. People can lease some of their land back to the commons if it's too big for them.
- The village is planned to be inter-generational, and to generate livelihoods as well as homes, and to cover all the trades / professions. Some people will work via the internet, which will depend on good fast broadband coverage. It's not easy for young people to buy in unless they have a skill to earn money in the village and can generate skills equity. A vendor finance plan is being developed for some sections to help young people to buy in.