

Proposal to protect New Chums Beach

by Gary Taylor

The exceptional natural values of New Chums Beach on the northern Coromandel Peninsula have been well documented. Now there is a really innovative offer from the landowners that could see the beach and its hinterland brought into public ownership and permanently protected for all to enjoy.

The deal involves the New Zealand Coastal Trust, a charitable entity set up by the Environmental Defence Society. It has independent trustees and is chaired by Hon Peter Salmon QC. The Trust would enter into a conditional agreement to buy the property. The price would be fair market value and that would be determined by taking advice from a competent, independent valuer.

Then the owners have agreed to donate half of the purchase price to the Trust. The balance would come from the Government, and perhaps, local government.

What it means is that through an extraordinarily generous act of philanthropy by the owners, New Chums would come into public ownership for half price. It is an approach that can be described as a PPP – a public private partnership, but for a new reserve, not a prison or a motorway. And the unique aspect is that the private contribution is a genuine gift with no expectation of a financial return.

The Prime Minister has urged the private sector to take a bigger role in philanthropy. We now have the tax system aligned to support such activity with no limit on the deductibility of gifting. The New Chums initiative takes that idea and gives it a new twist – applying it to public land purchase. It is an approach that could be emulated in other places where there is a conjunction of land with very high natural values and public spirited owners. Ngunguru spit comes to mind.

It also makes good sense in times of economic stringency. Strategic reserves acquisition should continue wherever we are in the economic cycle and this approach enables limited government funding to go twice as far. The New Chums owners have even suggested the Government contribution could be spread over time.

The New Zealand Coastal Trust does not see itself as a long-term owner of land. It is best described as a facilitator. In the New Chums case, it would want to immediately vest the land in a public agency – the Department of Conservation or Environment Waikato being two possibilities.

There would be running costs that would follow the vesting that would need to be taken into account. The property could support a network of walking tracks that would need building. It is already being improved for kiwi habitat and that would continue. There is a regenerating kauri forest to look after. The beach itself supports the rare North Island Dotterel which needs careful management during the nesting season.

The new owner could also enter into a partnership with the local Whangapoua community. There could be an active program of volunteer work, planting and tending the property. A New Chums Landcare Trust could be established to work alongside the new owners and organise the volunteer effort properly.

At this time of year, the coast is very much in focus. Many New Zealanders go there for the summer holidays. We love the coast but can't afford to buy up all of it but when rare gems like New Chums are on offer, the PPP approach makes it more possible to bring them into public ownership.

The Environmental Defence Society and the landowners have been working on this proposal for many months. Until we had an agreed framework, it was premature to discuss the matter publicly. Now we have put it to the Prime Minister who has agreed to "look at it." He has asked officials to report back to him in the New Year. We look forward to engaging with officials to work through the details of how this could work.

I am very hopeful that with some innovative thinking and goodwill on all sides, we can turn this new framework into a reality and ensure that New Chums is protected forever.

For those people who visit New Chums this summer, please continue to respect the fact that the land is still private land (down to mean high water) and that because of the presence of Dotterels, dogs are best kept away.

Gary Taylor is Chairman of the Environmental Defence Society (www.eds.org.nz) and a Trustee of the New Zealand Coastal Trust (www.nzcoastaltrust.com).