

Auckland's plan for 30 per cent sustainable homes by 2020 sees 20 houses certified

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JASON DORDAY/Stuff.co.nz

Rochelle and Joel Payne's ambitious Beachlands project is to build a rammed earth house that meets 10 Homestar criteria and the Living Building Challenge.

Auckland once led the way in sustainable housing in New Zealand but now appears to be falling behind. Dileepa Fonseka meets a couple whose battle to get help for their off-grid home illustrates just how much catching-up Auckland Council is faced with.

Auckland Council says it wants 30 per cent of the city's homes to be sustainable by 2020.

Currently, just 20 individual homes across Auckland meet the minimum threshold to be considered sustainable.

JASON DORDAY/FAIRFAX NZ

Rochelle Payne (left) says Auckland Council talks a great talk but has no policies in place to support builders of sustainable homes.

That's according to Sam Eagles, Chief Executive of the NZ Green Building Council, the organisation that administers Homestar ratings, who says fewer than 20 existing houses in Auckland have been given a 6-Homestar rating - a minimum measure of sustainability.

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Homestar ratings are used to assess a home's sustainability against standards of energy usage, health and comfort, water waste, and the type of construction materials used.

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Rochelle and Joel Payne have faced an expensive and uphill battle getting their "quite extreme" sustainable house built..

A 10-Homestar rating is the highest standard of sustainability.

"For homes, they do need to reinvigorate that and think about other innovative ways to get more new-build homes Homestar-rated," Eagles said.

Auckland Council's goal in its Low Carbon Auckland Action Plan is for 30 per cent of all Auckland homes to meet a minimum standard of six-Homestar sustainability by 2020.

JASON DORDAY/FAIRFAX NZ

The Paynes are constructing their 10-Homestar home using a rammed earth technique.

That is regarded as a milestone on the way to an overall objective of 95 per cent of homes reaching even higher Homestar standards by 2040.

CASE STUDY: 10-HOMESTAR DIGGS IN AUCKLAND

Advocates of sustainable building, Rochelle and Joel Payne, are constructing a house that one member of the New Zealand Green Building Council described as at the "quite extreme" end of the sustainability spectrum.

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Phil Goff has ruled out a reduction in developer contributions to encourage more sustainable homes to be built.

Rochelle says they are frustrated at the lack of recognition of the extra costs involved in building Homestar-rated homes.

Rochelle and her husband have bewildered Council's planning and consent bureaucracy by attempting to build a 10-Homestar self-sufficient home that won't draw on any of Auckland Council's core services - including water, wastewater, rubbish, and sewage.

The walls of their Beachlands home will be made from rammed earth, a technique where the earth is compressed tightly using pneumatic rammers.

To combat increased energy use during the cold New Zealand winter, the dirt will be compressed around insulation materials.

Greywater from the kitchen and laundry will be recycled and the rest of it pumped through a garden where it will be filtered through the soil before evaporating into the atmosphere.

A compost toilet means no sewage will be taken off-site and will instead be used once a year as compost.

The house's electricity will be generated on-site through solar panels on the house's flat green roof.

For their trouble, which comes to an estimated cost of \$150,000 on top of what a typical house might need, Rochelle believes Auckland Council should forgive all or part of her development contributions of \$25,346 - thus recognising the reduced load that sustainable buildings place on council infrastructure.

"All the infrastructure, schools, you name it, everything for the house is already there and no new provisions need to be made."

Rochelle's suggestion is not without precedent in New Zealand.

A similar scheme exists in Wellington and grants developers a 50 per cent discount for development contributions on large-scale residential developments that meet minimum Homestar standards.

She is petitioning for a scheme that goes even further than Wellington's policy - one that would allow homeowners who build new sustainable houses to get discounts from 25 to 100 per cent of development contributions, depending on how high the Homestar rating on their house is.

"We are talking about a leadership policy so that Auckland Council can encourage people to move from New Zealand Building Code up the ranks of sustainability."

Rochelle has been relentless - writing exhaustively to Auckland Council and its councillors but the effort has not been reciprocated.

She says the Mayor's office redirected her query to Auckland Council.

A letter to the Deputy Mayor Penny Hulse never drew a reply and the chief sustainability officer for Auckland Council told her the scheme was not within his remit.

When asked about Rochelle's petition, Mayor Phil Goff said Auckland Council was investigating ways of encouraging more sustainable design in Auckland including mechanisms like fees and contributions.

"The development contributions, however, go towards a range of wider community and social infrastructure such as playgrounds, parks and community halls."

Auckland Council's operational wing say they won't budge on development contributions.

Grant Barnes, Acting Director of Regulatory Services, echoed Goff in saying that occupants of sustainable houses still use community infrastructure so should pay development contribution costs in their entirety.

"If we were to reduce development contributions to promote the other benefits of sustainable housing, we would be required to find this funding for infrastructure elsewhere."

Rochelle says the Council did agree to forgive stormwater costs of \$3892 on her own property since her house was not connected to council's stormwater system.

Advice from a consultant on council processes told her consenting fees would likely be higher for her home than if she had just constructed an average Auckland house as she would need to prove most of her new processes met building code standards.

"Council is so silo-ed, you've got the Chief Sustainability Officer that's obviously got a little remit that can only do this and they can't look at that and then you've got the other ones over here that can't look at that,

"I imagine they can't put together cohesive policy very easily."

A far cry from a few years ago when requirement that all Auckland houses meet sustainability standards of a six-Homestar rating almost made it into the Unitary plan, before a legal challenge scuppered it.

NZ Green Building Council Chief Executive Andrew Eagles says that failure was a turning-point and Auckland, which used to lead the country in sustainable home-building, had since fallen behind.

"They kind of went from hero to zero."

"They wanted to mandate and they lost that discussion right? But the answer at that point is not to then give up."

COUNCILLOR: INCENTIVES NEEDED TO MEET TARGETS

Rules for the Special Housing Areas of Auckland were made on the assumption that Homestar ratings would make it into the Unitary plan, according to Eagles.

"There are thousands of homes right now designed and being built to six-Homestar in Special Housing Areas."

"But for all of the new developments happening outside of those areas they fall under the Unitary plan and they don't meet Homestar."

Eagles says this means even fewer houses meeting the six-Homestar target will be built next year as most house-building begins to move to areas outside of the Special Housing Areas.

This would have significant consequences for the city according to Eagle, as such houses send two to three tonnes less waste to landfill, are better for human health, and achieve large water and energy savings.

"Most of the homes built from next year, won't be Homestar-rated,

"In 10 to 15 years times we're going to have to strip out these homes and improve the insulation, improve the ventilation, make them water efficient, that's going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Both Eagles and Rochelle highlight Wellington City Council as a local authority that is using policy levers to make progress on sustainable building.

Wellington City Councillor Iona Pannett, who lead a push to enact Wellington's scheme to forgive the development contributions of developers of sustainable commercial and residential buildings, said there was "no kickback" from anybody at Wellington City Council when the policy was proposed three years ago.

"Sometimes owners need encouragement to do the right thing."

"Raising those performance standards can be expensive so some incentives are justified, because essentially it results in good social outcomes."

"It's not my place to tell Auckland how to do its business, but I would be surprised if you would meet that target, and it's an ambitious target, without some regulation and incentives."

Eagles says several alternative methods of achieving sustainable building goals were within Auckland Council's power, including a reduction in the infrastructure growth charge and faster consent approval times for sustainable homes.

"They could have done that in 2014, 2015, 2016, but they are starting to investigate some of those now,

"Phil Goff, he's a supporter of Homestar, he wants warmer better ventilated, drier homes and for them to be verified."

"So you're pushing at a bit of an open door but I think what hasn't been thought through is how those intelligent mechanisms can work."

Rochelle says the city will face much more significant costs if it doesn't encourage the construction buildings that waste less and use less.

"Auckland talks a great talk but there's nothing there to actually support people who are trying to do this,

"In fact it seems like they just try and make it harder for you and put you off."

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