

In relation to Emerson Street, in the same locality, Mr. Clapcott deposed : “ Without going into particulars, this is a very closely populated area, as a large majority of shopkeepers live on the premises or otherwise let the upper portion of the building as flats. Owing to the land in this area being valued at from £100 to £200 per foot, the greater part of the sections are occupied with the business portion of the building, leaving the residential portion with little or no yard-space, and being two-storied structures with the usual outlook of a lean-to roof.”

We express ourselves as being deeply shocked by this state of things, and when considered in conjunction with Mr. Oldham’s evidence to the effect that in the last fifteen years only 10 acres of residential land has been reclaimed and put on the market, it constitutes a grave indictment of the Harbour Board’s inactivity in the matter of reclamation. Figures showing the high rentals which the Harbour Board is receiving for small residential and business blocks in this locality were put before us for the purpose of sustaining the high potential values of the unreclaimed portions. With all the strength of purpose and vigor of utterance of which we are capable, we urge that the reckoning is not complete until the effect of these awful housing conditions on the physical, mental, and moral equipment of the people is taken into account. We trust that Your Excellency’s Advisers will take adequate steps to see that this evil is remedied as far as possible and that its recurrence is made impossible.

NAPIER’S REQUIREMENTS.

We come now to a point of view which we have ascribed to the Borough Council. We have partly anticipated it by our comments in the immediately preceding paragraph. The Napier Borough requires land for its natural expansion ; evidence placed before us shows that the requirements in this direction might be placed at about 130 building sections per annum. The city is entirely surrounded by the Harbour Board’s endowments, and is in this matter at the mercy of the Harbour Board, which has in the last fifteen years supplied on an average of six sections per annum. The result of this is that the Napier Borough Council is continually being applied to by residents for permission to subdivide the already small allotments into which the town is divided, so that further dwellings may be erected. Mr. William George Martin, a member of the Napier Borough Council, was deputed by that body to give evidence on this matter. He produced a copy of a plan showing the proposed subdivision of a parcel of land containing 29·23 perches. The proposal was to subdivide it into four allotments, and on each erect a residence with out-buildings. This application, we were informed, was refused by the Borough Council ; but the mere fact that it was made shows the scarcity of available building-land from which Napier is suffering. The interests of the Borough of Napier will obviously be best served by a policy which will remove this scarcity and which will place land on the market at a price that will enable a citizen of moderate means to secure a building allotment and build a home. Land-hunger is inevitably associated with high rents.

The Napier Borough Council is interested in an aspect other than the rate at which the Board’s endowments are to be put on the market, and that is the situation of any blocks made available, in relation to the existing lay-out of the borough. There have been conferences between the borough and Harbour Board, which unfortunately have led to no satisfactory result so far, and the borough puts forward the claim that the shape to be assumed by the town, the layout of drainage and transport facilities, and convenience of general access are all matters of the most vital importance to the borough. To bring the precise point of view forward in the form of a concrete example it may be pointed out that the area which the Harbour Board proposes to reclaim first of the total area comprised in the McDonald, Richmond, and Awatoto Blocks is a small portion of 35 acres near the High School, at the apex of the triangle which the Awatoto Block represents. This area lies just beyond the site of the High School—that is, farther away from the town than the High School. The borough representatives point out that this is a longitudinal extension of the residential portion of the town, and that this complicates the problems of access, transport, and drainage. They therefore suggest that the portion of the Richmond Block contiguous to Napier South should first be reclaimed, thus giving a compactness to the city that would not be present if the Harbour Board’s proposal is carried out. It was not made clear to us why the Board preferred to offer first the 35-acre patch on the Awatoto Block, except that, as it had decided to go on with the dewatering scheme, this was the easiest block to dewater, and the one that could most quickly be made ready by that method of reclamation. There may be some reason in that, although, in our opinion, it is quite outweighed if the matter is to be looked at from the point of the greatest good to the greatest number of people, on the considerations put forward by the Borough Council. Furthermore, it does seem to us that the attitude of the Harbour Board is quite unreasonable. Our view of the matter is that with these endowments in its hands the Harbour Board is a trustee for the district, and should view the potentialities of these sites as a trust to be administered, as far as it is reasonably consistent with the Board’s financial requirements, to secure the highest possible benefit to the borough on which it so largely depends. In his report to the Minister of Lands in 1925, Mr. O. N. Campbell, dealing with this matter, said : “ The responsibility for the provision of land rests with the Harbour Board, who absolutely control the situation, and if these lands should succeed in realizing only the bare cost of reclamation, the Board should proceed with the work as a public duty.” With that proposition we are in full accord.

The question has, however, been put to the borough representatives, and it was actually put to them at the inquiry before us, in the following form : “ What right has the Borough Council to dictate to the Harbour Board how it shall use its endowments ? ” The spirit behind this question seems to us to throw some light on the position that has arisen, and the inability of the parties concerned to come to any amicable arrangement.