

## Notice of Motion: Undergrounding in Albert Eden

Glenda Fryer

### Overview:

The Auckland Energy Consumer Trust (rebranded Entrust in 2016) was founded after the formation of Mercury Energy Limited to take over the business of the former Auckland Electric Power Board in 1993. Following the split of Mercury Energy in 1998, Vector Limited was formed to operate the transmission and lines business and is largely owned by Entrust (75.4%).

At the time of the Trust's formation, a promise was made to those consumer 'shareholders' residing within the former Auckland and Manukau City Council areas, and parts of the former Papakura and Franklin District Council areas that one of the benefits of corporatisation was that over time their power lines would be undergrounded to make their electricity supply secure and for aesthetic reasons.

However, it now appears that the 20-year programme to underground lines has been abandoned. According to the reported comments of the Entrust Chairman (see *When Will We Go Underground?* in Mount Albert Inc.), further progress depends on agreement with Chorus, a privately owned company which will only agree to undergrounding the telephone lines for which it is responsible when it is profitable to do so.

In the Albert-Eden Local Board area we are seeing opportunities to underground missed. The Sandringham Village upgrade by Auckland City Council some 10 years ago saw undergrounding of not only the village but also nearby streets. However, with the Mt Albert upgrade, despite Local Board members requesting that Vector come to the party and underground surrounding streets, this did not occur. In our neighbouring Ward of Waitemata the Franklin Rd upgrade by comparison has also seen an upgrade with the undergrounding of power lines.

With further upgrades in Point Chevalier and Greenwoods Corner planned over the next 5 years by the Albert-Eden Local Board, it is timely to request Auckland Council to become part of the solution and bring the parties to the table to get a good outcome for our community.

Auckland Council will be the beneficiary of the shares in Vector in just over 50 years.

### **Motion**

That the Albert-Eden Local Board:

- a. Notes that Vector appears to have underspent the funds set aside to underground power lines in the area covered by Entrust.
- b. Notes that the 20-year programme to underground appears to have been abandoned by Vector, despite promises to its beneficiaries.
- c. Requests that the Mayor convene a meeting of the parties involved in undergrounding power lines in the communities that elect the Entrust Board, with the purpose of working towards a solution that enables funds spent by Council to upgrade town centres and roads provide benefits to our community in undergrounding power lines.

d. Authorises the Chair and Deputy Chair to seek a meeting with the Mayor to advocate this position.

## WHEN WILL WE GO UNDERGROUND?



The answers to the questions of why “the authorities” would plant big trees beneath power lines and why Mt Albert streets can’t all have underground reticulation remain elusive.

Seeking straightforward answers when four agencies are involved has ended up in a convoluted version of pass-the-parcel.

Mt Albert Inc raised the issue last month, wondering why so many local trees have had to be butchered when they start growing into the lines above. Our position: Choose more suitable trees and spare ratepayers the maintenance cost.



Auckland Council, which has responsibility for berms where the trees grow, agreed there was a problem in some areas and, among other things, blamed private people for planting big trees – like the “doughnut tree”, a big liquidambar in Alexis Ave.

But the council mostly pointed the finger at Vector for abandoning its 20-year programme to put services underground, as they are in new subdivisions.

The council argument went like this: we thought all suburbs would soon have underground reticulation, so bigger tree specimen were planted on verges in some areas. When Vector changed its mind, the trees were well established – and the chainsaw now is the only option.

A Facebook discussion followed, and the further question was asked: what happened to the Auckland Energy Consumer Trust (AECT) promise to systematically push power lines underground?

AECT (called Entrust since 2016) is the private trust that owns most of Vector, New Zealand’s largest distributor of electricity and gas. It has 320,000 beneficiaries in the old Auckland City Council area, Manukau, northern Papakura and eastern Franklin and gives an annual dividend to each of them.

So we went to Entrust, and chairman William Cairns told us the undergrounding initiative is still in place, though plainly selective and moving slowly.

He reported: “In regard to Mt Albert, a large-scale undergrounding project that included parts of Mt Albert Rd was completed in 2008/2009. It was on the border between Sandringham and Mt Albert and included parts of Sandringham Rd and approximately 20 side streets. The total investment was around \$10m. Undergrounding has also taken place on Carrington Rd, and there have also been some additional small projects which have been partially resident funded.”

Mr Cairns says Vector manages the programme and selects project areas for each financial year, based on criteria such as:

- The condition of the lines and equipment in the area.
- Performance history (capacity and outages).
- The number of customers who will benefit.
- Other upcoming utility works planned in each area.



But ... Vector also needs agreement from Chorus to underground its telephone lines at the same time “otherwise there is no visual benefit to residents as telephone poles and wires would remain in place after electricity lines are underground”.

And unfortunately, says Mr Cairns, “Chorus has advised they will be reducing their funding on these initiatives going forward, which may have an impact on undergrounding in the future. We are actively liaising with Chorus to identify project areas where undergrounding can occur.”

So off we then went to telecommunications provider Chorus, which told us through a spokesman that the problem is volcanic rock.

“The reason that utility networks were originally put up on poles was due in large part to the difficulty in trenching to lay cables,” he said.

Much of the ultra-fast-broadband network has been designed to allow fibre cables to be hung from the existing pole network – “and most of the properties in the streets in question have aerial (overhead) lead-in cables for telecommunications and power. Undergrounding the cables in the street would require every homeowner to rewire the utility connection point on their house.

“Chorus does participate in shared undergrounding projects with Vector from time to time, where it makes commercial sense.”

Where does all that leave Mt Albert and the dozens of streets with ugly power poles and hacked-about trees? When will we go totally underground?

No idea, but don't bet the house on great change any time soon.

**Bruce Morris**