# Wairakei Reserve – a case study in connecting a community

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| Papamoa has a drainage reserve running through the spine of the residential area. Being low lying and having minimal fall, this could be a headache for the community. However, the reserve has been used to provide a walking and cycling connection for the community.  Many years ago, I did a reconnaissance ride from Papamoa East to Bayfair to identify ways to make the reserve a true asset to the community that would be used not only by grown men, but by women on their own and by school students. The initial recon showed a wonderful bush area east of the Plaza, full of re-veg species, which was really appealing to the men in the team but all I saw was a crime trap. Indeed, at the time, women only went through in pairs or with men, and none of the locals let their kids use it. The western segment had areas of safety, particularly in the more expensive Royal Palms area.  The plan was to upgrade the tracks to allow for 3m wide shared paths, catering for bike speeds of 30km/h, providing wayfinding signs at every street alley connection, and clearing out a lot of the vegetation to enable long sight lines so we can see whether the way ahead looks safe to use.  However, there is a balance to be struck with the ecology. Native vegetation provides filtration and stability. The grass meadows of Royal Palms don’t, and they need to be mowed on a frequent cycle. Conversely, the native vegetation of the Eastern section provides habitat for rats, and people.  The reserve as it is now is a great asset for the community. There are paths on both sides of the stream with multiple bridges, installed for the tsunami evacuation routes, throughout the reserve. There is wayfinding signage at frequent intervals. There are storyboards along the route telling the stories of the first people in the area. The wide paths and good sight lines were fortuitous since we weren’t anticipating the age of the e-bike a decade ago during the initial recon ride. The biggest measure of success are the numbers and diversity of people using the reserve, and why they are using it: put simply, the paths provide vehicle-free walking and cycling that the residents can use to get to where they want to go with the assurance that they can do so safely. They paths provide accessibility for our children to safely and independently get to sports, school, work and shops. They enable kids to learn to ride in a controlled environment. They enable the e-bike owners to zoom around without conflicting with other people. Residents use the trails for fitness and for an escape from Urbania. They also use it as a social gathering place at the end of a busy day just to relax, reflect and connect. |