

Terminal in more than one sense

I'm writing this on behalf of the plumber. By all accounts, he's a worried man. I say by all accounts because I haven't actually spoken to him lately (our plumbing is behaving itself, touch wood). The message came via my brother, who's having plumbing done. He says the plumber wants to know "when is that brother of yours going to write about the airport terminal?"

Good question. I share Mr Plumber's concern that the terminal expansion plan looks bloated for a transit building people just want to pass through as quickly as possible, probably not shop or conference in, nor pause in any longer than it takes to hug relatives over a Jim Hickey coffee.

I know an oil industry bloke who's been through airports on every continent, and he reckons New Plymouth airport is the world's best because he can get through in minimal time, notwithstanding a bit of crowd congestion at the sole gate.

I'm at a loss to know what happened between the makeover plan that was floating around after Jetstar arrived in February last year – a \$9 million version that had a couple of extra million added to accommodate the brash Aussie newcomer – and the latest iteration, which is threatening to nudge \$30 million and which apparently may still not have enough room in its vast reaches for the iconic Don Driver art piece celebrating our early air adventures.

If Daily News letters-to-the-editor are anything to go by, Plumber and I are not the only ones with doubts. While the majority of district councillors has approved the plan to reinvent the terminal into a 4000-plus square metre monster, I note that three with probably the best-tuned political antennae on council – John McLeod, Murray Chong and Gordon Brown – are opposed.

I sat through a council meeting that heard submissions on the proposal and I have to say submitters asked some very searching questions about what's going to be built. For instance, comparison with another regional airport suggests our new terminal will be nearly twice as big as needed. And if we're of a mind to spend up large, why not seal the cross runway and upgrade the navigation system to cut down on flight diversions caused by cross winds or low cloud?

With the exception of the doubting three, the councillors seemed unmoved, although they displayed a distinct sense of irritation at being challenged. They obviously feel well-briefed and convinced. Unfortunately for them, it's not a sentiment shared by everyone in the community.

Despite their pleas falling on deaf ears, the opponents don't seem inclined to melt away. Two – Peter Barker and Len Houwers – have done their own online survey, getting responses from 439 people, which is about the same as a council survey that mostly sought input on how the majestic rebuild should be shaped rather than whether it ought to go ahead.

The Barker/Houwers survey asked people which option they prefer – the original 2300 square metre proposal, or the 4090 sq m one that's been approved, or something else. Two thirds voted for the smaller version, with only about one in five wanting the biggie. That seems a telling rejection, one councillors ignore at some peril.

I have some sympathy for the council: whenever anything bigger than a bus shelter is proposed in any New Zealand city, the naysayers emerge in force. Part of me, though, reckons that's not a bad thing. Costly projects need to be thoroughly tested, no matter who's paying. They certainly were in local instances like the 1980s sewerage treatment project, Puke-Ariki Museum and Library, the Wind Wand, and the Len Lye Centre.

I can't help feeling the terminal expansion has progressed too effortlessly, that it's a flight of fancy easily pushed through because ratepayers won't have to foot the bill directly (except when they travel). It's been adopted without most of us having much chance to assess the strength of the case.

What happens, for example, if JetStar does more than a seasonal cutback of flights and pulls out, as it did in Australia with some regional routes. JetStar's boost to passenger throughput in 2016 came at a handy time, just when the twin dairy/oil recession began to bite air travel. Those passenger numbers –

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a key plank in the terminal expansion case – may not stay as buoyant as expected. If they don't, what impact would that have on the financial case for a terminal palace?

Mr Plumber's not convinced. Neither am I.