

Why ‘a-word’ needed in planning for aged

So, what do we really, really want? Is it abundant clean water, smooth roads, flood-free homes and the ability to cycle the coast to Urenui? Or do we want a community in which people feel safe, valued, included and cherished?

You say both, of course. But there is a philosophical debate playing out right now that may tip the balance irretrievably in favour of just one of those scenarios.

In New Plymouth next Saturday, a group of concerned citizens will stage a forum to ask its audience – that’s you, if you care to attend – what it wants this district (and beyond) to be, what it expects civic leaders to do in terms of making it a “people-friendly community”.

Two interpretations of that phrase have emerged. One mentions a word that has become politically radioactive – “aged”. Actually, a shorter version applies – “age”, as in “age-friendly”, a concept that came from the United Nations in 2002 and that has since been developed by the World Health Organisation as an imperative for successful modern societies.

A 2005 WHO report said: “Because active ageing is a lifelong process, an age-friendly city is not just ‘elderly friendly’. Barrier-free buildings and streets enhance the mobility and independence of people with disabilities, young as well as old. Secure neighbourhoods allow children, younger women and older people to venture outside in confidence to participate in physically active leisure and in social activities.”

A political conundrum resides in the word “aged” because of resentment that bubbled up in comments our mayor made about baby-boomers. These led – as he hoped – to national discourse about what’s to be done with the “aging demographic”. Now it’s time for action - next Saturday morning’s forum in the NPDC chamber will discuss how our district should interpret the WHO initiative.

The mayor and councillors have signalled a clear intention to broaden the concept into something that avoids the “a-word”. The problem is we don’t yet know what they actually mean by their substitution – “people-friendly”. The intent may be clear – it’s all-inclusive – but if the result ends up being a programme of improvement that should be happening anyway, the WHO’s well-researched, 15-year-old idea will become irrelevant.

The argument that it’s council business-as-usual was used by opponents to the age-friendly initiative when it first arose here a couple of years ago. Some councillors said they were already doing that sort of stuff, therefore it would be a waste of money pursuing such an enterprise.

My argument – and I suspect that of organisations like the Positive Ageing Trust, Age Concern and others – is you cannot divorce the initiative from the notion of aging. The impact of modern urbanisation, longer life-spans and greater expectations among older people is intrinsically part of a social phenomenon that’s going to affect our community whether we like it or not.

This council is trying to weasel-word its way out of political confrontation. It has included being a friendly community in its top 10 focus points, for sure, but look at the way it couches the policy: “People-friendly city. Our district already has a good reputation for being friendly and welcoming. The new Councillors are keen to build on this by enhancing engagement, including building on the Council’s current digital strategy to connect with younger members of our district.”

That’s a meaningless statement if ever there was one, and it not only avoids the word “aging”, but mentions only one demographic entity – youth, who are supposedly in need of a louder political voice. As someone once said: “The advantage of being aged is that you know what it’s like to be young. The converse does not apply.”

The way the council ranked its focus points gives a clue to its thinking. Last December, “people-friendly” was number six – now it’s last. While the council will deny prioritising, it seems so far to be developing the points in the order they appear.

JT column for May 13 2017 – age-friendly

There's a suspicion that "people-friendly" is on the list only because the last council – by the narrow margin of the previous mayor's casting vote – agreed to investigate the idea. That inquiry – not paid for by the council incidentally – has now reached a key stage: the first report has been produced and that's what the forum on Saturday wants to discuss with everyone.

At the risk of being too politically adept for your own good, if you're aged you need to attend and have your say. Oh, and young people are more than welcome, too.