

Sage advice for digital Barbara

I have two pieces of advice for candidates in the upcoming local body elections.

Number one - don't promise nil rates rises. The last lot who did that failed to deliver. Small rises - which they were finally able to deliver - are inevitable if we don't want to end up like Whanganui.

Number two - don't attack the bureaucrats. They're professionals doing their job. Your role is to steer the big picture, not attack-dog the minutiae. A slogan for you - guide, don't deride.

With this in mind, and with tongue moving in the direction of cheek, I want to offer guidance to chief bureaucrat Barbara McKerrow, who's pushing her organisation deeper into the digital age.

Okay, I'm going to speak to some minutiae, but hopefully you'll agree they're begging to be addressed.

The first occurred to me when contractors who empty our recycling bins decided unexpectedly to reschedule their run.

Since the system started, they've done our street around late morning, which means I'd grown confident about putting the yellow top out after I get out of bed around 8am. But this week I heard the growl of the truck before 8. Luckily, they went down the other side first, so I had time to rush out in dressing gown and slippers to get the bin to the kerb in time.

So first up please, Barbara, can we get a digital warning - a text, an email, a tweet, whatever, to tell us when the rubbish guys have had a change of plan.

And while we're on that one, how about a reminder on which week it is, recycling or bottles. I confused everyone in the street recently when I put the wrong bin out early.

Next suggestion concerns surveys. You had your annual satisfaction survey done recently at goodness knows what cost. It spoke to about 400 people. Frankly, that number is too small to achieve an acceptable margin of error.

But you could get to more of us if you went digital. There is bound to be a computer programme to sort the results. That way you'll know for sure what people think about you.

The next concerns car parks. I got a ticket the other day when I parked too long on a 30-minute space (adjacent to an empty line of 120-minute ones I didn't notice). I was busy doing an interview, forgot the time, blah, blah. You know the story.

How about a digital system that sends a warning to my phone when I'm past the expiry time. Or even better, if it's a pay space, takes 10 cents from my account to cover it.

JT column for August 6

Then there's roadworks. You could develop a system that warns us whenever we leave home that some routes will have roadwork holdups and are best avoided.

I know you're contemplating water meters. If you go that way, can we have digital meters that keep us informed on how we're doing consumption-wise. And can we have them in a form that's understandable - unlike the complex so-called "smart" power meters that show all sorts of confusing numbers.

I haven't even mentioned apps. What kind of apps are you planning, I wonder? I guess there will be a MyCouncil one that tells at a glance everything I need to know about our household's relationship with your organisation.

Especially how much money we're expending just by being here - how much sewage we generate, perhaps; how much water we drink; how much rubbish we're contributing; how well we're recycling; how often we're wearing out tarseal on the roads; how much use we're making of parks, swimming pools, the airport...it's endless.

I'd like it to be two-way, of course. I'd want our new digital relationship to keep me up to date with how you're spending "my" money. I'm thinking maybe a pie chart of the kind you put in some reports that splits into segments the various ways rates money is expended.

That way, every time your councillors make a decision about something that will cost me money, the pie chart will reconfigure its segments and I'll be able to see the impact on your budget (and mine).

It would make me a much more useful ratepayer, because when it comes to setting the rates rise each year I'd be able to give you some guidance. I'd know exactly where all the money is going, so I could be as wise about it as anyone. Digitally speaking.