

Still a way to go on 2016's bugbears

In the tradition of media outlets in late December, this is a chance to ponder over the past year, revisit some of the issues I've written about, sort of thing.

The local body elections were the biggest for me personally. Not just because I had a tilt on the hustings myself - without leaving so much as a dent - but because of the changes electors made to some of our local government lineups.

New Plymouth got an unexpected mayor, but we shouldn't have been surprised. Neil Holdom's victory came on the back of a shrewd two-year campaign and in political times that favoured fresh alternatives.

Another thing that helped him to the chains more quickly than he had originally hoped was Andrew Judd's epiphany over Māori representation, a public self-examination that cost him the mayoralty after only one term. The tragedy was Judd did a good job of overseeing the New Plymouth District Council reconstruction begun by his predecessor, Harry Duynhoven.

Giving re-emergent Māori a meaningful say on how things should be run is unresolved, and all the more urgent with half a billion dollars in settlement money coming into play in Taranaki over the next few years. That Māori will be a significant economic force doesn't guarantee local political engagement, but it certainly enhances their case.

Holdom and his council believe the Waitara settlement bill before parliament is on track to resolve one of the most significant grievances, but Otaraua and Manukorihi Hapū are implacably opposed to anything less than a return of the Waitara block to Māori hands.

Treaty Minister Chris Finlayson has been firm on treating with iwi only. There is a way to go before Te Ātiawa will get to the negotiation table with a unified stance, and it may not match the one in the current bill.

The Len Lye Centre featured in a couple of my early columns. While it has so far exceeded expectations in visitor interest, its place in the political firmament remains brittle.

The local body election returned one of its most vociferous opponents, John McLeod, and at the first meeting of the council's Performance Committee this month he and others launched salvos on the centre being \$300,000 over budget this year, and needing an increased budget next year.

The overrun was because of greater visitor numbers than budgeted, according to council management, which meant more staff were needed, especially for the Emanations exhibition whose loan conditions demanded greater vigilance. With debate over building a plaza in Queen St postponed until February, more conniptions can be expected.

The state of our northern road remains an issue close to my heart - and backside when we travel over it in our puddle-jumper with its low-profile tyres.

Everything will apparently be hunky dory now the government has stepped in with some big money to upgrade what passes for a highway, but in my view the original (much less costly) plans formulated over decades by retired regional councillor Roger Maxwell and his colleagues - with an emphasis on making it easier for lesser motorists like me to pass trucks - has been hijacked by government bureaucrats who want to spend most of the cash on just two of the many problems, Mt Messenger and the Awakino Tunnel.

A December announcement by NZ Transport Agency that it would reseal the southern approaches to Mt Messenger before Xmas gave temporary cause for hope. “We know that State Highway 3 is an important route in and out of New Plymouth,” said the agency press release. “Regularly resealing roads makes them safer to drive on.”

How true. But when I asked them how much road was involved it turned out to be a mere 1.7 kilometres. Oh well...

Greenpeace got upset about my column lampooning their rigid views on Taranaki’s oil and gas industry. I couldn’t agree more that renewable energy must replace fossil fuels if we are to do our bit about slowing climate change, but taking a big stick to middle New Zealand is hardly the way to achieve that.

Greenpeace has been highly regarded in New Zealand since the epic campaign against nuclear testing in the Pacific, but it sometimes overplays its hand, such as in its constant attacks on the state of our rivers.

As a fellow columnist remarked before Xmas, if anything, Taranaki farmers are well ahead of the New Zealand bunch with their riparian care programmes and it’s time Greenpeace and fellow travellers gave credit where it’s due.