



The Accidental Mayor

Neil Holdom made some sort of history when he won New Plymouth's mayoral contest. A lot of people were surprised. How could someone with no apparent experience of local government come through and grab the top local government job?

That was a lot of people - but not all. At least one man knew differently a few days before the result came in, and there's solid evidence of that in the form of a phone call.

Peter Tennent rang Holdom to ask if he was ready. He wasn't, Holdom replied, because he didn't think it would happen. But Tennent thought otherwise, invited the disbelieving mayor-to-be for a coffee, and gave him advice about what to expect on the first few days after his mayoralty was confirmed.

How could he have known? For those who know what to look for - and Tennent being a former mayor obviously does - there were plenty of signs the city was in for an unexpected change.

The easiest to read now, with 20/20 hindsight, was the exit poll conducted by Daily News reporters after the paper's sponsored mayoral debate. An overwhelming majority of those present picked him, and that was reported in a front-page lead story. Gold, in any election campaign.

Another was apparent at one of the rare candidate meetings, the one hosted by Inglewood Lions Club, when Holdom's relaxed style - as opposed to the caution of his main rivals, Richard Handley and Heather Dodunski - exuded confidence, promise and a freshness no experienced politician can match.

There were also the letters-to-the-editor. Holdom had dozens of them published, many more than anyone else, and they made telling points (apart from one suggesting Fitzroy Golf Course be partly sold for housing). And they had been appearing for nearly two years. As well, there were his press releases, often based on searching Official Information Act requests he made of the council.

Mind you, there were indicators the other way, as well. He performed poorly in the early 2015 by-election, placing a distant fifth with 2475 votes, well behind winners Roy Weaver (7310) and Harry Duynhoven (3804). In the October election, in which Holdom stood for council as well as mayor, his vote soared almost five-fold to top spot on 11,596 (several hundred more than Weaver).

We could go on, but there's little point. It's history. The question now is much the same as the one that emerged from Brexit, Donald Trump and Joseph Parker – what happens next?

In this article we go some way towards finding out, because one thing you can say with certainty about Neil Holdom, we'll none of us die wondering what he thinks.

He is disarmingly candid, about himself - “don’t forget, it wasn’t that big a win” – and about any issue you care to raise.

His self-deprecation is an art form. On the night he learned he’d won, he posted a picture on Facebook page showing a road with an enormous hole in it and two signs, one saying “Just speed up a bit” and the second “You got this”.

Exactly.

Behind the apparent guilelessness, of course, is a sharp mind, a sound grasp of politics, management, strategic planning, budgeting...and human nature.

Some of it comes from a childhood spent in down-country Taranaki. Awatuna, to be exact, near Kaponga on the Eltham-to-Opunake road, where he grew to teenage on the family farm.

Some comes from Victoria University, where he studied philosophy and political science for a double-major bachelor degree. Some from journalism. The rest from his most recent career as communications majordomo at Powerco, where he has directed the company’s public relations and more recently its strategic planning and relationships with central government ministers and a couple of dozen local authorities.

Yes, take note of the last. Far from being a local body novice, Holdom has been working with councils for years and probably knows more about their thinking than anyone else at the New Plymouth District Council table. So much for the supposed lack of local government experience.

That doesn’t mean, however, that there weren’t one or two procedural glitches when the new mayor chaired his first full council meeting. He’ll no doubt learn. His colleagues showed more than willing to help, and with none of the edge that would be apparent if there were residual resentments.

There was a gentle nudge here, a respectful reminder there, especially from the acknowledged master of meeting procedure, councillor Gordon Brown, who was demoted from being a chairperson when Holdom announced his new committee structure. It confirms something Holdom says in his interview with Live.



“This is a team outfit. I’ve said to the other councillors: ‘You guys are going to need to help me, because I’m the only one in here with a young family’. With a lot of events, I’ll take the kids. But with others, the councillors have been really good.

“We’ve got a governance team and we’ve got a management team, and we’ve got very capable staff. I’m still learning the ropes...this is a complicated statutory creature. But I like complicated systems, and unpicking them. I’ll spend half an hour unpicking a knot before I’ll get the scissors out.

“My strengths are in the financial areas, the infrastructure areas. Where I’m a bit weak is on the social side, but I’ve got other councillors who’ve got real strengths in that area. I don’t need to know everything, but I need to understand how the mechanisms of the systems are working, how the governance team actually governs, and how we articulate our influence through the Local Government Act to ensure that management are held to account.

“I went off to ‘mayors school’ (at Local Government NZ) – that was useful. (But) you don’t have to be 50 years in local government to know that it’s an infrastructure business with a layer of social services wrapped around it. I think what I bring is a contemporary commercial management approach to running council that the councillors certainly find refreshing. (Chief executive) Barbara (McKerrow) and her team are engaged in it.

“I’ve talked to them about the use of technology and how we use our scale and potential to be more people-friendly and more efficient. I think that this is a very well-run organisation. This district is the envy of many other councils around the country that I’ve seen, many of them in dire financial position.

“We’ve got a strong balance sheet, strong management team, and we’ve got a well-aligned council team. They’ve sorted out the financial headaches. Andrew Judd has done a very good job of clearing the decks for me to come in and start building again.”

So, what will he and the team build? What are the issues? Unlike newly elected councils of the distant past who went into summer siesta after an election and only revealed their hands come February, Holdom and crew have roared out of the blocks.

He sorted his committees within days, renaming the main ones and appointing new chairs, a swift move that dismantled anything resembling a power bloc from the past term. Was that deliberate, by the way?

“No,” he says. “That’s your interpretation. I went and spoke to everyone within a day or so of the election. I just asked them all the same questions, about what they wanted to do and where they wanted to go and where they saw their strengths and interest areas.

“The beauty of coming in from the outside was I didn’t really give a huge amount of thought to what had been. I knew what I wanted to build. I know when I talked to Roy (Weaver) and Stacy (Hitchcock) about their passion for where they want the city to go that they were the right people to lead the planning team.

“And when I talked to Richard Jordan and Marie Pearce about how council runs and their focus...they have farming backgrounds and they know how to run a business. They know how important it is to be monitoring what’s going on, and understanding all your inputs and outputs, and they were the people I wanted to run the performance team.

“I met Craig (McFarlane) and I thought he was a good fit for deputy mayor. I mean, he’s a mechanic, you can’t say much more than that, eh. You ever find a mechanic that isn’t a good bugger? He’s solid. He’s just a straight-up good dude. He and his wife have built a really good business, and they’re well-respected in Waitara.

Workshops followed, then an announcement – the top 10 things the council wants to address. Significantly, it wasn’t an Obama-style executive directive from the mayor, but a summary of the new team’s aspirations.

A Stuff online poll showed water sustainability as the public's top priority (20 percent), followed by improving the central business district, making the city a world-class visitor destination, and zero waste.

That vote for water probably confirmed Holdom's long-held instinct that infrastructure like "the three waters" (drinking, storm and waste) is the key reason local councils exist. It was water, in fact, that first got him interested in standing for council.

"I just became really concerned about the long-term plan for water, so I started reading those plans a couple of years ago and realised there were some capital deferrals that I didn't like. The council – and it was a tough call for them - they'd lost all their TML (investment) revenue, so they slashed the cap-ex.

"At times, we (Powerco) have had tough years and we've stopped everyone from travelling, made everyone do teleconferences, and look for where we could shave costs. But the board would never allow us to stop our capital programme. That's critical – that's your core business."

But he saw that happening at the council, "...and particularly in the fresh water, drinking water. If you have a look in the current long term plan and you follow it through, there's a graph that shows between 2020 and 2025 there's no capital expenditure at all. In theory, this council needs to spend about \$5 million a year capex on water just to keep up and keep the thing ticking over – and there was a bunch of it missing, \$10 to \$15 million. That kind of got me into it.

"So, I put my hand up for the (January 2016) by-election knowing that I wouldn't get in, knowing that Harry (Duynhoven) and Roy (Weaver) were way higher profile than me, but it would get my name out there in a positive light."

He had already begun the letters to the editor and the news releases. "It was a two-year plan, and just boom-boom-boom. I had a flag that popped up in my diary once every two weeks - find something to write a letter about.

"I made lots of Local Government Information Act requests to these guys. I drove them mad. I'd send through one request a month. I play hard, but I also play fair, so when I issued my media releases on stuff that was critical of the council I provided them to Barbara, so that they always had time to prepare.

His main goal was to generate publicity, because in the years after leaving the Midweek editor job in 2003 and starting at Powerco, he and wife Melissa have lived quietly on a lifestyle block at Lepperton, raising three children. "Melissa and I went off the grid, because we're very private people. We haven't had a social life. Unlisted phone number. We've been at home with our kids, and that was what we chose to do."

As he envisaged it, the master plan to get elected as a councillor for at least a term and then maybe have a crack at the mayoralty, didn't work out. He stood for mayor this time only because mayoral candidates get much more media attention.

"You'd be a pretty arrogant person to think you could beat two strong incumbents. Heather (Dodunski) and Richard (Handley) are really capable people who'd done amazing things. And basically, you know, less than a third of people voted for me, so it's not like I had some major victory (his winning margin over Handley was 551 votes).

Yet, as his father said to him, historically this district has almost always picked younger mayors, including Denny Sutherland, David Lean, Peter Tennent, and Andrew Judd.

"I was really fortunate that a couple of days out from the election, Peter Tennent rang me and asked: 'Are you ready?' And I went: 'Nah, it'll be someone else. If I work really hard I think I've got a reasonable chance of getting on the council'. And he said: 'Nah – game on', and I went around there for a coffee and he gave me some very, very useful advice about the first few days."

The first week was a bit of a whirlwind, he says. "I didn't sleep for about five or six days. The brain was just flying. You've got a normal life that's busy with three kids, and a wife, and a lifestyle block

and animals that need to be fed – and two fulltime jobs. Yesterday I had the first two-hour gap in my diary.”

The next questions, then, are what will he be working on, what issues will occupy him, and what are his views on them?

The “top 10” list - agreed on with his colleagues and council managers - includes water sustainability, shaping the central city, zero waste, iwi/Māori input, becoming a people-friendly city, developing as a visitor destination, extending the coastal walkway to Waitara, fixing Waitara’s stormwater floods, developing Port Taranaki, and something called “flagship infrastructure”, which includes redeveloping the airport, the TSB sports stadium and the aquatic centre.

These will inform the council’s long-term planning, he says. But more than that, they will influence a rethink of the much-vaunted 30-year Blueprint put together by the last council. “The Blueprint is nothing really. The Blueprint is a bunch of ideas. As far as I’m concerned, unless it’s priced or estimated and budgeted and there’s a full financial model sitting behind it, it’s just a dream.

“I’d like to go: ‘Waste – what are we going to do? What are the projects? What are the costs, what are the revenue streams, what are the maintenance streams, what are some of the risks, where are our assumptions?’

“Same for water, same for waste water, same for stormwater, same for roads, same for our parks...because if we have a 30-year plan it stops politicians hiding things. All you’ve got to do is push something from year 10 to year 11 and it disappears out of the current model, and that’s unhealthy. I want a transparent council that’s fully accountable, and if the rates go up people will know why, and we’ll have discussions.”

There are issues other than those listed in the Top 10, or peripheral to them, including one of his personal preferences – selling off part of Fitzroy Golf Course.

“No way has that gone,” he says. “I’d like there to be a nine-hole, start-of-the-art Fitzroy Golf Club, with beautiful new clubrooms for members on the foreshore with a café and a restaurant. Park users can still run through the park - and council would slowly release 10 sections a year on the inland side. What’s a sea-view section in Fitzroy next to a golf course worth?”

Community group funding? “First and foremost, we’re not a welfare agency. There are some awesome people wanting to do some incredible things, and they need other people’s money. That community funding is a little cherry on the top for organisations that have a strategic alignment with council’s activities. I think it was right when times were financially difficult that the funding was cut. We’ll see what the impact is.

Aging demographic? “I care about our whole society. It’s not just old people who have needs. I’ve had people come in over the last couple of days talking about youth. We’ve got an aging population – an aging population that wields power well, and they want more resources. It’s a bit of a shame if you’re under 18, isn’t it - if you can only get stuff if you can wield political power.”

He believes the baby boomer generation coming through is a selfish one: “It’s the most selfish generation we’ve known – the first generation that’s richer than their kids, basically, on the back of housing inflation. But who’s going to buy all your property, because none of our kids can afford it? Your grandchildren are going to be the first generation poorer than their parents.”

He concedes the sheer numbers will influence council policy-making, but “I want to influence them. I want to have that conversation with people and make them face up to it. That when they go ‘aging population’, what it really means is ‘What about me?’, and I go: ‘Well, what about everyone else? What makes you more important than the next lot?’

“How much of our children’s future are we going to sell off to sate a greedy and aging population that wants everything for themselves? When they talk about the aging population in the same sentence as ‘don’t let the rates go up’, what they are really saying is ‘take something from someone else’. Because for every new thing here, I either have to put the rates up or I cut something somewhere else.

“It’s going to undermine the viability of the current rating model. The model won’t work in 20 years. I would be advocating a rating model that probably looks at GST as the answer, or a combination of this model and GST.”

How does that work? “Here’s an example: the government has just booked a couple of billion dollars of GST revenue from tourists. And what’s bringing tourists here? The facilities that council pays for. We get nothing for that investment. Len Lye – we get nothing, it’s free.

“I see a future rating model based on this consumption tax. Or a hybrid, so it’s part to do with property. People are doing very well from property inflation, so there should be a correlation in property rates.

“It’s a discussion with central government. It’s a parent-child relationship – we’re the petulant child and they make the rules. But we have got them to admit that looking 20 years forward, it’s a problem that needs to be solved.”

He talks of the city being “people friendly” rather than just “age friendly”. The council, being a bureaucracy, sometimes doesn’t help. “We’re a bureaucratic machine that writes policy, and in some cases the best-intentioned policy is not people-friendly.

“If you’re a developer, some of our planning considerations are diabolically unfriendly, and they slow down your development, so instead of taking maybe two years they might take four or five. And in the meantime, you’re carrying the cost of the capital, on the deposit, on servicing the interest.”

Saving our heritage buildings in downtown New Plymouth? “You only have to see the White Hart to see what happens when things go right. Some of those beautiful old buildings - it’s trying to find a balance, balancing our heritage with progress. My bigger concern for buildings is what are we going to do with the ones that are financially a write-off when you consider earthquake strengthening. Empty buildings, and then absentee ratepayers, and then the council gets left with it. We need to think about that.

“Our main street is a diabolical, ugly-looking thing. It looks like a town planner went on holiday. Allowing the Warehouse to have an overhang - the Warehouse is just a blight on the landscape. Centre City, where it is, another poor decision. There’s no continuity in the way any of the shop buildings look. Some of the paving and stuff looks all right, and at least some of that has a consistency to it.

“The plane trees are a pain in the butt. A question I’ve asked myself is, now that I work for the council, if I wandered down there with a chainsaw and cut them down, could I be charged?”

Māori input? “That’s an important thing, so I’ve already been talking with a number of iwi leaders and we’re just trying to work out how that might work. There’s potentially some other stuff out at Te Kohia Pa. Could be something out there in the not-too-distant future.”

The pace of the road north redevelopment? “Wouldn’t it be a coincidence if we saw a road cone and a digger up there two or three weeks before a major election? I think it will happen faster than people realise. I’ve worked on these big projects, and when you’re talking about land rights all you have to do is put yourself in the place of the farmer who is affected.

“The government has made a commitment to spend that money, which is good, and it will happen in a couple of years, which is good. What you can’t do is steamroll over people’s right. This isn’t China. I just think, yes, it will be very good for Taranaki, and it will happen in the amount of time that it has to happen.

What about the Lonely Planet boost? “The visitors I want coming here, I want them in planes, spending money. I don’t want them in back-packs, crapping on the beach.” He has written letters pushing the Taranaki Traverse, connecting the coastal walkway to Egmont National Park, developing the Pouakai Crossing.

“I think it’s kind of a 10-year project. It’s going to take a long time. We have to work with DOC. I think we could get to Mangamahoe reasonably easily, with a few gaps. Some sort of trail. I’m not

talking about a high-end thing – it could be mixed media, some gravel, some dirt. Mangamahoe gets us a third, nearly half the way up to the mountain.”

“We build that traverse, we link all that up, and it will be another part of our tourism offering. These are people who spend money, and they stay in accommodation, and they’re well-behaved, and they’re good for our economy, and they come back. And the thing is, I don’t know how many times you’re going to visit Len Lye, but if there’s a good trail, you might come back.”

He is optimistic about developing the future of Egmont National Park. “I think iwi will be a fantastic landlord. In all the activities I’ve dealt in with them, they have shown themselves to be open-minded and progressive. We will want to look at what elements we need to protect, and what are the elements we can improve access to, and what are the recreational changes we can do.

“I mean, it’s weird that you can’t land a helicopter on the mountain. It’s a volcano. As long as you show respect for it. There are disabled people who deserve an opportunity if they can afford it to get up there and have a look around. You’re not allowed to land up there because of DOC, and they’re difficult to deal with.”

Another of his big interests is digitisation of the council’s services. What does that mean? “The last two years I’ve been looking at that digital work for Powerco. Obviously, some people want a front desk, and some people like a phone, and that’s absolutely right. But more and more services can be delivered online. It should be available to you 24 by seven so that you can do it in your time.”

On the wall behind Holdom’s mayoral desk is an emblematic wall-hanging, a diagram of words like “empathy, accountability, integrity, diligence and respect” writ large in the swirling pattern of an eye.

These are the values he and his council colleagues will hew to. He refers to it a couple of times during our interview, perhaps illustrating something of his inner qualities as a thinking man, someone who stored away a lot from his university studies of philosophy.

He’s come a way from the recalcitrant boy at New Plymouth Boys High School in the early 80s – a “little shit”, he says, who asked lots of ‘whys: why should I do this, why should I do that?’ Someone who was so disruptive in one class he got the cane from deputy head Lyn Bublitz, a man he now respects and calls a mentor in later life. “They banned caning not long after. I was probably one of the last.”

More recently, he has been reading the likes of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology. “One of Jung’s theories was that the things we see in other people that piss us off are generally reflections of parts of ourselves that we haven’t dealt with.”

Which brings me to a delicate question – how will he manage discordance among councillors? Oops – “manage” is the wrong word. Holdom: “I don’t manage any of them. They’re grown-ups. We’re a team. They manage themselves. People have said to me: ‘What are you going to do about this person, or that person? They’re all the same. They’re all my colleagues.

“People have their view of whoever it is based on their interactions, and I’ve never let that inform my view. I mean, if you’re a convicted murderer I might have one eye on the door and how to get away.” An interesting comment, given he has removed the physical barrier to mayoral access on the mezzanine second floor of the council building, a barricade erected by his predecessor after threats following the Māori ward shemozzle.



“We’ve got a new council, it’s a new team, and it’s got a different dynamic. I’ve said to all of the councillors: ‘You guys do what you want to do...do what you’ve got to do. What you’ll know from me is what I’m up to and how I’m going to do it. We’ve agreed to those values, we’ve agreed to these goals, we all own them.

“The things that we disagree on are probably five percent, and there’s a tendency to focus on that five percent, and that’s that concept of argument. Essentially 80 percent of council is boring roads, sewerage, water...Te Kohia is sexy, a new airport is exciting, exciting, but the core part of this job is to make sure the potholes are sorted out and the water runs cleanly, there’s no poo in the river. And everyone agrees on that sort of stuff.”

So, how is the routine going after the first few months? Well, there was the fist pump.

To recap: When the council’s performance committee debated how much it should be giving towards a plaza outside the Len Lye Centre – to which businessman John Matthews has pledged financial support – things got a little ropey when councillor John McLeod stood up and accused Matthews of (to quote the Daily News report) “continually coming back to council with one hand out wanting more money, while the other hand was holding a baseball bat behind his back ready to give council ‘a good clubbing’.”

“While Councillor Harry Duynhoven called McLeod’s comments ‘completely out of order’, mayor Neil Holdom and (councillor Gordon) Brown could be seen smiling, laughing and fist-pumping across the table at McLeod.”

Holdom rejects the notion it was a misstep. Asked to comment for this story, he said: “I’ve got a bit to learn as a new director, and I’m sure my leadership style will adapt as I learn this new environment. I said in my election campaign I will upset some people, and I’m not going to be a grey man that does what everyone expects of him.

“I’m going to have some fun with it and so are my council. Yes, we’ll be under scrutiny, but I’m not going to do what everyone expects, because people are sick of that. They don’t want that from leadership – they want real people doing real stuff. If I want to make a gesture, so long as it’s not an inappropriate one... I’m a package deal – I never said I was a saint.”

At the first full council meeting of the new regime, his council colleagues took a cossetting approach to him as a freshly minted chairperson. They, he – and hopefully, by extension, we – have got this.