

What next after Lye pay-to-view decision?

A spell might have been broken by the New Plymouth District Council's decision to charge out-of-town people to enter the city's art gallery. It goes against convention in New Zealand, and raises the question of what else this council might do to overturn tradition.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. The fact generous benefactors bequeath wonderful things to a community should not preclude the ratepayers' representatives from reviewing the long-term implications from time to time. That the hitherto free-entry Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has morphed into something of a hybrid, in fact a different proposition, makes such a rethink all the more justified.

Half of the gallery has existed since the 1970s after a spectacular gift by a wealthy art lover; the newer part has been around only a short time, following donations not only from another wealthy art lover but from the government, an oil company (while times were still good), and others.

Big donations sometimes come with strings attached. The visions of the main benefactors can be pivotal. The Govett Brewster trust deed sets out a key part of the now-combined gallery's vision, which is to be a leading national and Pacific Rim repository. That worked well in the past, and the gallery's reputation has been maintained, assisted by continuing grants from the Monica Brewster bequest fund (\$38,300 last year) for acquisitions.

What's the rub, then? Two things, related to one another. One is that ratepayers bear the running costs, which are mounting at what seems an alarming pace; the other is the gallery's policy denies local artists the opportunity to stage their annual combined exhibition there (although the gallery does host some Taranaki art shows). We'll come back to that long-running debate in a moment.

The art gallery's profile had been low-key for a long time, but marriage to Len Lye has changed that. They're one and the same so far as most ratepayers are concerned, and the conjugal process has made life less sanguine. As with a lot of stressed marriages, the main problem is dollars.

The combined Govett-Brewster/Len Lye enterprise now costs ratepayers nearly \$5 million a year. While there are plenty of benefits – a national reputation boost, increased tourism, greater visitor spend, local employment, enhanced cultural and educational opportunities, architectural awards – the downsides have caused angst for some ratepayers, perhaps many ratepayers.

That hasn't been helped by what appears to be a fundamental problem with the contents of the Len Lye halls – too little of Len, it seems to some. That problem was acknowledged by Susan Hughes, the new chair of the Len Lye Foundation, when she told the council meeting debating a door fee that she has some sympathy for those concerned about exhibitions, and will be doing her best to address that. If she succeeds, that might take some heat out of the situation.

In a broader sense, the issue is much wider than putting a ticket machine on the entrance to the big, shiny icon. It's about the uneasy balance that always exists between what people pay in council rates and how that money is spent. Most of it goes on fundamentals (water, parks, sewerage, roads and the like), so there's not much real flexibility. Which makes council debates over how much each special interest group should get all the more interesting.

It might be argued there's a divide between two broad arenas – those catering for physical pastimes like sport and exercise, and those related to cerebral pursuits, like the kind we've been addressing above. It may be the latter segment of society is now seen to be doing rather too well, that the equilibrium has been disturbed by the cumulative effects of two great donations.

Mayor Holdom and his council need to tread cautiously. Have they done enough to settle ratepayer unrest, or will there now be an expectation that more, even all, of the council's discretionary spending should be reviewed?

Here's a suggestion for them: combine management of the art gallery with that of Puke Ariki Library and Museum. The latter is doing well...and it puts on a very fine exhibition of local artists' work. Would showing the stunning Homework assemblage at Govett-Brewster really damage the art gallery's standing?

JT column for Nov 25, 2017 – Len Lye door fee

If we're going to overturn age-old customs, let's make sure we leave nothing out: toll gates on the walkway and Pukekura Park, anyone? Or councillors deciding what goes on show at the art gallery? Just seeing if you're paying attention...