

Dodging the issue of free-lodging

I'm vexed by the freedom camping thing - as were New Plymouth's district councillors, who caved somewhat on the issue of what to do about those who want to stay in Taranaki for free. The council's decision to do next-to-nothing is not surprising, because there is no simple (read: not expensive or draconian) answer.

The freedom campers they're concerned about are mostly young people who don't want to spend their limited resources on being corralled safely away at night in places that now have to charge like the proverbial to meet society's over-weening expectations about health, safety and outdoor living standards.

These freedom-campers - as opposed to those who belong to the motor-caravan association and have self-contained vehicles - are people who don't mind un-glamming it in the back seat of a car or in a throwaway, postage-stamp tent barely big enough for two people to turn over separately let alone together, and surviving on noodles and tuna sandwiches for weeks on end.

It's likely they'll willingly pay 15 bucks to get in to see what little there is of Len Lye or risk their lives on a zip line or whatever it is they do, because that's what they've come here for, rather than spend up large on our splendid camp grounds, whose existence throughout New Zealand is threatened by ever-increasing land values and ever-lifting standards of luxury and hygiene.

I wrote about this topic in February, accusing the government of achieving wonders on attracting more tourists to New Zealand without giving a damn about the consequences for the regions. At the time, we were reading of farmers having to lock their gates - previously open to occasional campers - because hundreds of people were turning up, attracted by comments on the social media grapevine.

Taranaki's famous Surf Highway has the same problem. A few months back, when the weather was still cold and wet, I called in at one of its top surf breaks to investigate water pollution, and noticed there were freedom campers parked on the roadside. The place will be packed with them this summer, the minimal toilet facilities will overflow - and local surfers will seethe again.

That last point is the critical one, isn't it. Should councils spend their ratepayers' cash on building bigger and better toilets and water supplies at places that are packed with fee-dodgers for a few weeks each year, while requiring campground proprietors to meet strict standards?

Or should they use the money to enforce no-camping rules that are probably unenforceable? The latter worked okay in Spain when I toured in a camper-van 50 years ago, but that was probably because the enforcers carried machine guns.

There will be a bit of enforcement in the council's new bylaw: no camping in the Fitzroy Beach carpark (within spitting distance of the Fitzroy motor camp), or on the Oakura beach front (two spits from the motor camp) or at Back Beach. There's no camp near there, so that one's a mystery - why not include Kawaroa Park, where councillor Gordon Brown wanted at least a limit on numbers (he was unsuccessful)?

Another rule says you've got to move after three days. That one's supposedly aimed at long-termers, but it would be easy to circumvent - just go to another spot after you're been warned. And costly to police; done properly, it will require security people to tour the length of the council's coastline every morning and evening, from halfway down Surf Highway up to Tongaporutu. All year. Yeah, right.

It's interesting to note how this whole issue has morphed over the last decade or so. Back early in the new mill, dozens of uniformed members of the afore-mentioned motor caravan association packed the council chambers to ask councillors respectfully if they could camp freely. It was agreed they could, if they had certified self-containment.

We went through that process with our camper-van. It's rigorous and expensive. Many of the association's thousands of members have self-contained vehicles now, so they must be somewhat irked by issues caused by the new breed of freedom-lovers.

JT column 30.12.2017 – freedom camping

They would have been heartened when our newly minted mayor declaimed his aversion to people coming down here and shitting on our beaches. And irked again when they saw last week that he seems to have moved away from that - for them - promisingly uncompromising view. I'm not blaming him, mind. After being in office for a while, he's better informed about the intransigent nature of some issues facing elected representatives.