

## Mayoral visions need to be fully explained

Every mayor takes office with a personal vision. We wouldn't want it any other way. But it may be timely to examine this phenomenon in the light of the current mayor's announcement he wants to sell off council property to fund our current wish-list.

Beyond the essential stuff like better water storage and zero waste, the wish-list stalls somewhat on what he calls "nice-to-haves" - an upgraded municipal swimming pool, for instance, and a better indoor stadium.

All the mayors I've observed over a long time demonstrated the significance of strong visions, some more precarious than others. Back in the 70s, Denny Sutherland promoted an unimpeachable one, the Bowl of Brooklands (his deputy, Roy Burkitt, pushed for the railyards to be moved out to Waiwhakaiho).

Denny's successor, Daisy Lean, changed people's thinking on a crucial environmental issue – what to do with our sewage – and managed it during a time of impossibly high inflation (above 20 percent). Claire Stewart (the only woman in the bunch) picked up the potential for a coastal walkway from Lean's early foreshore land manoeuvres and pushed it through its most expensive stage, the \$4.5 million stretch beneath Woolcombe Tce.

Peter Tennent invested in some of the nice-haves, although his council also took some risks with the offshore purchase of dairy farms in Tasmania (something that worked out okay in the end, I should add). I wasn't around for Harry Duynhoven's brief reign, but presumably we should credit him with the Len Lye Centre (seen by some as still in the debit column).

Andrew Judd tidied up the dwindling perpetual investment fund and through an epiphany that neither he nor we saw coming, made a bold move to buy an iconic symbol from the 1860s land wars (although some people are now saying it's the wrong bit of land).

Which brings us to the latest incumbent, Neil Holdom, the representative of a younger generation and not surprisingly in possession of ideas that may run against the grain of older ratepayers (the ones who tend to vote). He hasn't put any feet wrong so far in choosing his priorities – water, zero waste, et al – although I still have doubts about the airport revamp (actually, a Judd initiative).

Now, though, we may be seeing his first hitherto less-well-known vision: to sell off bits of council property to fund developments that can no longer be paid for from the perpetual fund, whose annual contribution is limited these days to just a few million.

There was a hint of this during the 2016 election campaign. Holdom told us he wanted to reduce the council-owned Fitzroy Golf Course to nine holes and make many millions from the sale of the rest for housing. It enflamed a lot of people in Fitzroy. But faced with the non-renewal of their lease in 2023, the golf club's members see little option but to co-operate; better half a golf course than none, even though the flash neighbouring golf club, New Plymouth, has offered them discounted membership.

So we were warned. Holdom was upfront about it, and didn't back off after being elected, even though strong opposition was voiced prior to the poll. What most of us didn't know about, however, was the idea of extending the selloff to other council-owned land. Now we do. How do we feel about it?

In a letter to the editor, regional councillor Craig Williamson voiced candid opposition to the district council getting into development, saying it would be well-advised to stick to the traditional method of funding new council projects – long-term debt paid off by the coming generations that will benefit from what's built. I've heard similar opposition from others.

That doesn't mean Holdom's grand plan should be summarily dismissed, however. In effect, he is addressing one of the murkiest areas of government at any level - the past acquisition of land for purposes that later vanish.

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I recall doing a story about one of Auckland's flashiest suburbs, Parnell, where close examination of town plans revealed that over decades a dozen households had spread onto to accessways and ad hoc bits of public property whose original purpose had long disappeared. The householders were naturally outraged at having their cheek exposed.

To make this fly, Holdom must tell us explicitly which bits of land he's spotted that might be surplus to needs. And if any of them involve parks and reserves, he better have very good reasons for wanting to dispose of them.