

Fitzroy sale sunk by ‘recycle-gate’

So, that’s the end of Mayor Neil Holdom’s bid to sell half the Fitzroy Golf Club course. The vehement opposition shown in many of the 4029 public submissions to New Plymouth District Council’s draft 10-year plan meant discarding the idea was the only realistic outcome.

Actually, getting a clear picture from the submissions proved difficult. For a start, they were posted on the council website as Adobe pdf documents, which are usually searchable - except these ones weren’t. I wanted to search street addresses to work out what proportion of submitters live in Fitzroy. It was a crucial point, because the mayor stated he was more interested in what non-Fitzroy-ites thought of his plan.

Conclusions proved elusive, not just as a result of “protections” the council put on the documents (by accident, they said), but because many submitters left the address slot blank. As well, some members of the golf club don’t live there anyway. Submissions with no address may be from people who didn’t fancy having their privacy invaded (as thousands did); it’s also possible they wished to deny the mayor an opportunity to prove his point.

Unsurprisingly, there were clear signs of co-ordinated opposition, as you usually get from a well-organised campaign. Somewhere between 250 and 300 opposing submissions used one of several formulaic sentences or passages of protest. That hardly matters, because similar wording or not, they all counted as independent “votes”.

And that’s where the analysis got more straight-forward: by my count, more than a third (about 1350) expressed opposition to the sale of reserve land. The number supporting the idea was just 45 – a little more than one percent.

More than 40 percent say they didn’t want so-called “flagship” projects at all and urged the council to live within its means. Sometimes using language that’s far from polite, they warned the council to stick to its knitting, which for them is fixing the roads, maintaining green spaces, providing water, taking away rubbish and sewage, and in some cases rethinking the grandeur of the airport rebuild, among many other suggestions.

Of interest was the size of the group - more than 20 percent – urging the council to take more than \$30 million from its perpetual investment fund (PIF) to pay for a flagship project. Only 10 percent wanted councillors to stay with the preferred approach of the past, raising rates and debt.

There was another complication, something that may have biased the result towards a desired outcome for whoever designed the process: two of the flagship funding options included the term “recycling” (of council land).

What land was that, I wondered - the several pieces (some in gullies and occupied by sheep) identified by the previous council as surplus, and worth about \$5 million? Or any land, including the golf course, the racecourse, or other reserves the mayor and his supporters might deem ideal for their land development vision? The survey didn’t say.

While a large cohort of responders castigated the council for the Orwellian taint attached to the word “recycling” in this context, a quarter of submitters still ticked those two boxes, which were labelled “alternative” sources of funding for flagships. At a stretch, Holdom could have claimed that by doing so they supported selling the golf course (although dozens said they don’t). If a majority of councillors had agreed, the sale might still have happened.

The whole acrimonious and costly exercise amounts to a major defeat for the mayor. He will need to find a gracious way to admit defeat if he wants to avoid being our third one-term mayor in a row.

Voters might forgive him, because as councillor Marie Pearce pointed out, he’s “having a learning curve”. He’s a new mayor with no previous experience of being a councillor, his unexpected election perhaps part of a global political change, a la Brexit/Trump et al.

For me, the survey was flawed for omitting a funding option suggested by a few submitters (and floated at the last election by Richard Handley). Instead of raiding the PIF, the council should gradually wean itself off using the annual payout of about \$7 million to meet running costs, and accumulate it in a fund for emergencies, or – if we must have them – flagship projects.

There was a laugh or two among the submissions, like the person who said council staff shouldn’t forget they are “civil serpents”, and the guy who asked if recycling land meant hoeing it up.