

Policy reset aimed to diminish Fitzroy

You may have had enough of the Fitzroy golf course sale saga, but it's useful to look back at how the matter unfolded within New Plymouth District Council. Lessons may be learned from what was a well-intentioned but ill-directed strategy to raise money for new projects many would like to see in our district.

The first hurdle faced by the council was the Fitzroy Golf Club lease, but even more significant were the council's legal obligations.

Council lawyers advised that the golf club has no automatic right of renewal for its 21-year lease when it expires in 2023, so council representatives met club executives last year to tell them they could keep roughly half the land they occupied and have a nine-hole course, or find somewhere else to play golf.

A key initial obstruction for the council was its own Significance and Engagement Policy, required by the Local Government Act. Written in 2014 after limited public feedback, it set rules for how the council must judge the significance of an issue and how much consultation must be done with anyone directly affected.

The policy was an impediment to the golf course sale proposal because its list of strategic assets included "parks" and specified that anything affecting a park - especially a significant one (like Fitzroy Golf Course and part of Peringa Park) - had to be discussed with the nearby community. It was probably obvious what Fitzroy people would say.

A revised policy was written. The commentary accompanying it by way of explanation to councillors indicated the old one was pretty good, and had been approved after feedback from 12 members of the public, but it needed updating because, among other things (including something to do with the airport) it contained "jargon".

In the new version, the word "parks" in the assets list was joined by the words "and reserves". The policy revision writer explained that in future a strategy called "whole of network" would apply, meaning that in the case of policy decisions, all the district's reserves would now be regarded as a single entity.

Consequently, selling off one proportionately small part of the network no longer needed to be discussed with the neighbour - only the district's population as a whole. That apparently met Local Government Act rules and gave the council legal right to sell a single reserve, any reserve (Pukekura Park included), without having to ask particular groups of affected people for a direct "yes" or "no" response.

When discussed by the council's Planning Committee on August 23, the change apparently worried some councillors, because a motion to adopt it put by Crs Tracey Hitchcock and Roy Weaver was lost.

Who voted for and against was not recorded. That's because for most decisions the votes are taken on voices, with the minutes recording only the movers and whether or not a motion passed. There is no written record of who voted for or against unless a councillor requests what's called a "division", when there is a show of hands and the result is written down.

Main committee and full council meetings are recorded by video, which can give an indication of how councillors vote, but the council's online video of that meeting no longer appears on its website, because they seem to be left online for about three months.

The policy revision didn't just vanish on August 23, though, because the committee passed a new motion from Crs Shaun Biesiek and Alan Melody recommending "that having considered all matters raised in the report, the Council consult on the revised Significance and Engagement Policy". That meant let's ask the public.

09.06.2018 JT column – selling parks

However, that appears to have been somewhat complicated a few days later at the September 5 council meeting, by a motion from Biesiek and Mayor Neil Holdom: “that changes to the Significance and Engagement Policy are adopted and a collaborative community plan is developed to review the Significance and Engagement Plan in time for the next Long Term Plan”.

That was passed. Again, no vote (or opposition) recorded, video no longer online. No explanation of either “plan” is recorded in the minutes. We now know Fitzroy people were not consulted as a separate group. Later, the mayor commented on radio that when it came to consultation on Fitzroy, he was not referring to the community with a vested interest, that is, the neighbours: “I’m talking about the 80,000 people in our district.”

Eventually, he heard from quite a lot of them.