

When a contrary view won't wash

I'm a great supporter of contrary opinion. It's one of the tenets of democracy, and New Plymouth District is well-served – some would say too well-served – by contrarians.

John McLeod and Murray Chong are two district councillors most likely to speak out against mainstream thinking. They're sometimes joined by Shaun Biesiek in what may be a bid for the mayoralty (he says not).

That doesn't mean other councillors sit mutely by. Every councillor has his or her pet issues and stances, which makes the mayor's job of being chief whip an unenviable one. Think of herding freedom campers.

All of which makes what happened at the last council meeting a memorable example of the art of the possible, in this case a decision to adopt the World Health Organisation's strategy to become an age-friendly community.

Nearly all councillors backed it. The case was well-shaped and well-presented, the result of nearly four years of research and consultation by its leading proponent, the Positive Ageing Trust. The trust got \$40,000 from the government to prepare its pitch, work that involved talking to many groups, including the four North Taranaki community boards and the council's Māori liaison committee, Te Huinga Taumatua. All gave enthusiastic support.

The council had already signalled its backing in the 10-year long-term plan adopted on June 6. In a response to various submissions on that and accessibility, council managers said: "The council is currently working on the process to become a WHO accredited Age-Friendly community. The council will consult key stakeholders throughout this process. Council is also due to commence a review of the Accessibility Strategy with a view to update it in 2018/19."

At that June meeting, the long-term plan's section called "community partnerships" was approved - with Chong voting for and McLeod and Biesiek against.

As a result, the age-friendly proposal finally arrived before councillors at the Planning Committee meeting on July 12. I say "finally" because the Positive Ageing Trust submitted its plan to the council in August last year.

It was roundly praised by those at the Planning Committee, although we don't know what Chong and McLeod thought because the latter didn't speak during the debate and Chong was away on business.

The latter is unfortunate, because Chong chairs the Accessibility and Aged Issues Working Party, the council-based group most involved with the WHO strategy. Its other council member is McLeod, and they sit alongside a range of people from aged, disability and other community organisations.

Councillor Stacey Hitchcock chaired the July Planning Committee meeting and moved a resolution (seconded by Richard Handley) that the full council go for WHO accreditation. There were no dissenting votes.

Those came at the council meeting on July 24, when Chong and McLeod had their opposition recorded. Biesiek voted in favour but voiced reservation the council governed "for the community not an entity", and the strategy needlessly replicated what the council already does for everyone.

Chong and McLeod presumably have the same argument, but the latter said nothing, and Chong got himself side-tracked when he claimed the policy is racist. That brought strong censure from Gordon Brown (who moved the resolution to adopt the strategy, seconded by Hitchcock). He said Chong's claim was outrageous and asked him to withdraw it.

Chong asked the mayor what would happen if he didn't. At that point, deputy-mayor Richard Jordan walked over to whisper something in Chong's ear. He repeated the question – what were the consequences of not withdrawing? There was no clear answer, and in the end he sulkily withdrew.

The body language of most of his colleagues suggested what might have happened next, but we'll never know. Mike Merrick successfully moved an amendment calling for those handling the strategy to report back annually.

What happens now? The council will set up a new working party and ask for representation from Taranaki Regional Council, Taranaki District Health Board and other organisations. Since everybody is at pains to say the aim is to include all members of society and not just those pushing the aged barrow, it's likely the working party's membership will include youth.

There's at least one elephant left in the room. What happens to Chong's role as chair of the existing – and presumably soon-to-be-replaced - Accessibility and Aged Issues Working Party. His position is untenable.

One other thing: will McLeod now tour rest homes and explain to those he wooed during the last election campaign why he now opposes an age-friendly community?

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