

Who does own the NP airport?

Judging by the heat in letters-to-the-editor and online debate, there are irate people out there when it comes to the fate of Don Driver's airport sculpture.

Which is why I looked up a 2015 Auditor-General report about council-controlled organisations. It's worth a read as we scrutinise the manner in which New Plymouth District Council's airport CCO, Papa Rererangi i Puketapu Ltd, handles the issue.

The Auditor-General report says a CCO must meet the expectations of both its shareholders and its community. "It operates in a political environment and is accountable to its community for its use of community assets or ratepayer funds."

Sounds good, but it runs into an age-old divide - "governance versus operations". Here's an example: when Hospice Taranaki got started back in the 1990s, there was a problem with its board members dwelling on questions like how much milk was in the staff fridge, rather than focusing on policy-setting.

Understandably, those charged with the day-to-day running of an enterprise want to get on, unmolested by elected politicians whose job is theoretically confined to establishing broad principles...and responding to public feedback. That's what the discussion came down to at NPDC's Performance Committee meeting, at which PRIP CE Wayne Wootton presented his organisation's first annual report.

Led by Colin Johnston, several councillors asked again what will happen to the Driver sculpture. Wootton's reply was a masterpiece of caution: "At this stage, the mural will stay in the existing building until it is demolished and will be carefully taken down...but we are looking at putting it into a viewing area which will potentially be in the location of the existing terminal (unclear), along with a lot of other artefacts that we have at this stage."

Councillors asked for more detail. Wootton told them the work may be placed outside in a container with a perspex front, possibly in a public viewing area of the tarmac. Nothing was firmed up. The mention of perspex drew derision from Murray Chong because of its tendency to turn opaque in weather.

Following the meeting, the council's chief operating officer, Kelvin Wright, sent a brief note to councillors: "In terms of the Don Driver work, PRIP have committed to looking after it and respecting its history and importance to the public.

"At the moment their focus is the new terminal, they have heard your concerns, and in time they will look at the detail around how and where this is displayed in an appropriate way. It's not a priority for them at this time. They have a terminal to build and an airport to run, but I'm sure they will be happy to share the details when available."

Richard Handley was one who responded to Wright (Handley forwarded his email to me at my request): "You are probably as irritated about this as I am, for different reasons no doubt!! Just to be clear, my position is as follows:

- * I asked the question at an early session with the PRIP Board and we were verbally assured the work would be included in the terminal.
- * It was shown clearly in the artist's impression of the terminal in the business case.
- * It was also shown in the picture in the *Midweek* of September 26, as has been gleefully pointed out to me by others!

* We were advised by a TDN article (from PRIP, not from council) that it wasn't to be included (great process?)

* We are now told by PRIP that it won't be displayed in the terminal: "...due to limited available wall space and type of ceiling construction." Bollocks - the architects stated otherwise.

"I am tired of being constantly criticised by community members about our apparent inability to get PRIP - a 100 percent-owned subsidiary - to respect its history and importance to the public. That is why I am grumpy."

The council appeared split at the Performance Committee meeting. Some, backed by mayor Neil Holdom, said the council appointed the PRIP board members for their expertise and councillors needed to let them get on with the job. That accords with the Auditor-General's view that "CCOs operate best at arm's length from the local authority".

Handley copied the mayor into his emails. When I last talked to him, he'd heard nothing back. Those of us looking on will be wondering how this plays out – on the side of accountability to a concerned community or for the convenience of an arm's length entity?