

Home stays and mystery clauses

It's hardly news that vested interests and the lobbying power they wield to protect their financial positions have a lot to do with the way government works.

You know that as much as I do, and yet I found myself checking definitions of the term "vested interest" to be sure I hadn't forgotten some variation of meaning.

But nope. It's clear as filtered water. What's not so clear is how it actually works, so let's look at what is perhaps – only perhaps - an instance, involving one of our most important economic activities, visitor accommodation.

It sprang from a newish approach to accommodation that in its various forms may pose a threat to those who operate traditional modes, like hotels and motels.

It's related to the general term "homestay", when people rent you their house, sometimes a normal home whose owners vacate for the purpose, or as is now more common, have never lived in, having bought the place for its potential new income (more than rent, apparently).

It's a simple idea that's been cleverly branded and has swept the developed world. It's become so popular that established accommodation may be worried, which would hardly be surprising. It takes years to plan and build a hotel, for example, and nobody would do it without the prospect of good returns over a long period.

What we're leading up to is something which popped unexpectedly above the parapet of a formidable document that, once formally approved by the district council, will guide New Plymouth's development for the next decade or more – a new district plan.

Its formidableness comes from size, intricacy and blandness. Who would want to read such a behemoth after it gestated and left the computers of a group of dedicated district council officers who have been assembling it for, well, a long time?

Not all the people who count, it seems. Not everyone we elect every three years to apply their vision to ensuring our town operates efficiently appears to have digested what the new plan held within its many pages.

I say "it seems" because that's the only conclusion I can draw from observing what's happened so far, in what at first appeared an obscure protest from those locally engaged in home and bach stays.

They noticed or were advised - tipped off, perhaps - about clauses in the plan that mirror those in other places like Auckland. They're guidelines designed to ensure new home accommodation operators observe similar rules and pay similar commercial rates and fees as established providers.

That seems fair. If you have millions invested in a hotel you have a right to expect people competing against you to play on the same level field.

I don't know whether or not that will be achieved in the newly launched district plan, but what I am hearing about is a problem with its processes. According to several councillors, past and present, they got no warning about what was going on with new homestay rules.

The clauses were written by council staff, but apparently nobody thought such changes important enough to be debated at a public council meeting before they ended up in the draft.

Some councillors got no prior warning there might be controversy when the plan was published recently. Elected people not at the top of the pecking order get a bit sensitive about things like that. Rightly so.

Did staff act on their own and stray into the realm of policy-making without consulting elected representatives? Were some elected policy-makers (but not all) subjected to lobbying and so acted accordingly, instructing staff to fix it.

Perhaps staff came across the issue during their long-term consultations with the community and decided something should be included, subject to approval by councillors. At what stage was approval meant to be gained? Before the draft was written or after it was published, which is apparently where we're at now?

I don't know. I haven't talked to any councillors, nor the head one. Perhaps somebody could put my mind at rest. And those of any officers who face criticism that may be unjustified because perhaps all they did was some research that found home-staying puts a load on communities that needs to be paid for. Perhaps there was no lobbying at all.

This column resulted from me being lobbied by homestay vested interests, who are keen to petition the council with a bunch of signatures they have gathered. So it goes.