

P-word a no-no in CBD talks

CBDs must be the most cosseted real estate in the world. Unless something routine gets in the way – potholes, water, waste, stadia or art galleries – local councils intent on leaving a legacy are likely to fasten on main street.

Main street-itis has persisted in New Plymouth partly because of the once-proud claim that we have the longest straight principal thoroughway in New Zealand. Trying to remedy the geography-imposed handicap of narrow elongation has gone on since Alonzo Carrington drew the first street scheme 180 years ago.

NPDC has begun another CBD planning assault to follow up one in 2016, another in 2012, and others before that. This attempt is more crucial than ever because of rapid social changes, online shopping (the “Amazon effect”), the prospect cars may become less vital to our lives, tourism growth, and competition from main street’s fringe rival, big-box alley. Waiwhakaiho Valley will expand further if the old fertiliser works site is redeveloped as proposed.

Apart from the appeal of bulk and product range, the Valley has something main street has been consistently unable to provide – available, free and roomy parking close to the shopping. As Mayor Denny Sutherland said in the 70s, shoppers want nothing less than to park outside the shop.

The latest initiative is led by councillors with commercial nouse, Shaun Biesiek and Alan Melody. So what can they and various council officers, planners and consultants come up with that will refresh our most important hub?

The council asked city-centre businesses to submit thoughts on what might be done, then invited them to a meeting on October 30 to talk about their ideas. By some accounts, the evening was a limited success because it was dominated by council presentations, with attendees getting little time to talk back.

However, mayor Neil Holdom and others say it was just the start of a long process that will see the audience’s CBD submissions collated and sent back, with submitters asked to return for another hui, when listening to them will be paramount. Council surveys will follow.

If you want to know what might be done, I recommend the council’s informative hour-and-a-half video coverage of the October forum, which provides detailed context to the discussion NPDC wants to have.

Suggestions include encouraging centre-city living so the CBD grows its own consumer community, reducing the dominance of cars, enhancing pedestrian experiences, creating more green spaces, helping preserve heritage buildings faced with government earthquake strengthening demands, reducing regulatory barriers to investment and building, and prompting the growth of more “clusters of interest”, including a health one for the oncoming aged-populace tsunami.

The “P” word (parking) was largely avoided, even though one presenter conceded the majority of the 70-odd submitters wanted to know what can be done about it. When I talked to Biesiek, he too deflected the question, saying the focus is on innovative ideas for central city refurbishment, an endeavour that’s being pursued all over the world.

But I still want to know what will overcome my preference for the Valley, motivated by not wanting to battle city parking impediments - like the many handy spaces that seem perpetually filled, wheel-damaging kerbs, parking machines made unreadable by rain, overly slim carparks that promote car door amputation, kids on bikes on the footpaths, and having to cross busy streets ruled by aggressive speedsters.

He concedes they need to look at such issues. There are plenty of parking spaces and average overall occupancy is less than 50 percent, but there are timing issues, such as allowing too long in some spaces and not recognising the city doesn't close at 5pm when free parking starts. Staff need better options to park away from the centre. Greater use could be made of the one-way system for parking, and safer connections created for pedestrians, who are the shoppers and tourists, after all.

A previous failed experiment in Sutherland's day may deter bravery. However, that closing off of the bottom of Devon St was always doomed – it didn't allow public vehicle access and neglected to cover roading and gutters with proper paving, making it seem half-baked. Appearance is everything.

To my mind, the roading experiment outside the library is worth extending. Napier, for example, has paved whole streets in a way that allows parking and limited car access and doesn't encourage unimpeded through-traffic. What about free mini-buses looping the CBD? Better connection between foreshore and Pukekura Park? Opening up more of the Huatoki? Oh, and better parking.