

Looking back without anger

This is a “look back in hope” column. Actually, there’s a little bit of anger, not directed at anyone in Taranaki, but at the nether digital world, whose corporate masters surpassed themselves in ways to get more money and annoy the hell out of us.

One of my first 2018 columns looked at how we’re coping with this. It was not optimistic, which proved appropriate: during the year, Facebook, Apple and other mega ‘net companies were outed for various sins. In protest, I vanished myself from Facebook.

I’ve done the same for Twitter. The level of anguish in the daily pleas from its robots and those of Facebook has reached satisfying heights. A writing stylebook I attempted to publish on Amazon was so bugged up I’m now giving it away to anyone interested. My Apple phone is as good as dead because of the built-in obsolescence of its battery.

Google surpassed them all. It offered automatic storage of all my digital material, a process that repeatedly crashed my PC as it tried to upload 15,000 items each day. It cost \$600 for a tech to discover what was going on. The intent was to fill my 100 gigabytes of “free” storage, then pressure me to buy more.

Another early column highlighted the paring back of Plunket. It may have helped delay provincial cutbacks, but the story quickly disappeared from the news discourse, so I don’t know. The centralisation of various organisations continues. Wellington thrives on it, while the provinces despair.

A wonderful conspiracy theory doing the rounds says New Plymouth’s February water crisis set off by a fallen tree was a hoax. Some genius believes a photo showing the smashed water main can’t be real because of the way the water is spraying, just like the US flag “fluttering” on the moon. Meantime, the councils and civil defence have produced a thorough report on how we can better deal with such events in future.

In March, I fulminated on the great plastics plague. The ban on bags is upon us: how will we go? Will the growing minority who steal supermarket baskets and trolleys prove to be significant; will we accept the need for action and not try to find ways to ignore it?

I worried about education reform, too. The “new” government is showing signs of stirring, but I don’t see much action to help Witt. It’s boss has quit and her deputy - a highly competent ex-Taranakian brought up from Wellington to help - has returned to the capital.

Witt's once-thriving journalism training school - whose industry advisory group I still technically head - has long vanished, without anyone ever explaining properly to me or my colleagues. We still have money in trust to fund students, donated by generous former Taranaki journalism families. Any thoughts, Witt?

I columned on NPDC quite often. It had a lot going on under "new" mayor Neil Holdom, not all of which dazzled me. I hope he learned something about consultation over Fitzroy Golf Course, New Plymouth airport's revamp (Don Driver), freedom camping, Waitara leaseholders, the council building revamp (has there ever been a bigger public tent?), and the Paritutu Back Beach staircase.

Because, critical as I am of Holdom at times, I want him to succeed. Having a young leader with such extensive knowledge of infrastructure - which after all is the council's core business - is advantageous.

He will undoubtedly stand again and will have a changed council, since four or five vacancies will open by election time next October. As well-performed as the two women councillors are, I'd like to see more, and a stronger Māori presence.

One of the year's outstanding councillors, Stacey Hitchcock (the other was Alan Melody) has shown the importance of more diverse input, although Stacey herself downplays gender. She is surely a mayor-in-waiting, and has made no secret of the fact she'd like to be deputy-mayor next term, which is not an unrealistic ambition.

Other columns have dwelt on Yarrow Stadium (unresolved), hydrogen production (unclear), renewal of the CBD (did you try to get a park there during the Xmas rush?), the snail pace of council acceptance of being an age-friendly city, the need to preserve recent history (which I hear second-hand has earned me a ban from Puke Ariki), and Waitara land (a final step needed).

My 2018 award for best performance - TRC for its continued progress on cleaning up rivers. Happy New Year.