

How to consult without talking

It strikes me New Zealand's local councils are either slow to learn or simply unwilling to consult the people they serve.

Properly consult, that is - not the spin doctor approach taken with selected issues. Officers need to alert those who represent us to all plans and decisions that are likely to be controversial.

How else can we explain the giant fence that's been built around a new subdivision in Lower Hutt? The local council did little to protect the interests of neighbours, so now there's a row going on and lawyers gearing up...and costs about to mount for people who did nothing wrong except trust those they elected.

It's happening here. The Back Beach steps and the Don Driver airport sculpture are examples. Another is the subdivision announced for what was once a sports ground for Fitzroy School. There was no initial public consultation in any of those instances.

Now the council is scrambling to explain itself, but why in the first place did it think nobody would notice? But then it did have to be asked why it pitched a giant tent on its own roof.

The Fitzroy case resonates with me because that piece of land was Fitzroy School's main sports arena in the 1950s. I spilt blood there in an accident that put me off playing rugby. I tackled a big lad during a game and broke my nose on his knee, proudly returning to class with the red stuff streaming everywhere.

We played rugby, cricket, soccer and bullrush on that ground, not thinking that one day the education ministry would donate it to the land bank set up by a past government for Treaty of Waitangi settlements. Te Ātiawa is lined up to buy it as part of the iwi's settlement and wants to build 14 houses there.

I have no quarrel with that. Things change, more housing is needed, and the land was pinched from them in the first place. But I do have qualms over the New Plymouth District Council's handling of the application from the iwi's commercial arm to develop the subdivision.

The council's officers are sticking with their view that it's a routine matter under the Resource Management Act and didn't need to be formally notified to the public...or the councillors. However, there seems to be an inconvenient clash between that law and the one governing local body activities, the Local Government Act.

That stipulates councils must have a policy on consulting with the public, and New Plymouth District Council does. It's called the Significance and Engagement Policy, which states anything the council is doing that may be controversial must be publicised and people given a chance to have their say.

So, let's think: Fitzroy...plus turning green spaces into subdivisions. Wasn't there controversy last year about mayor Neil Holdom wanting to sell half Fitzroy Golf Club for housing? The club's just a couple of blocks away from the former Fitzroy School sports ground, for goodness sake. Controversy? Nah.

Well, um, maybe, especially given this is an election year for councils. If I was standing again - which I'm not - I would be advising the mayor and his colleagues to stay well away from that part of town (and Paritutu).

My old home suburb seems to have been getting a raw deal from this council. First the golf club, then a proposal to let freedom campers stay in the carpark behind the shops, and now an un-notified subdivision in an area where there are already traffic concerns.

The planned housing area will probably empty its vehicles onto Record St near a point where it's so narrow some residents have to park their cars half on the verge. There's also the impact on Fitzroy School. More enrolments are likely to come from the 14 new houses, but I'm told NPDC initially made no significant moves to consult with the school.

It's starting to look as though Fitzroy people need an advocate on the council, although that's not how the system is supposed to work. The city has 10 people to represent its combined interests, so where they live should be irrelevant (ignoring the fact four councillors represent Waitara and Inglewood).

Anyone from Fitzroy standing in the elections in October? I'm not aware any of the existing councillors live there, the nearest probably being Councillor Chong. If he's electioneering in that vicinity, he should do it cautiously given what's happened over this council term - maybe in a tank.

Daily News Letters to the editor, April 16

Letters

The Battle of Tucker's Nose

Jim Tucker's Saturday article is apposite. However, the reference to the council's Significance and Engagement Policy is not, although the council not only should, but must, adhere to its own policies. The provisions of the Resource Management Act are paramount and thus have precedence.

That point also brings up the difference between consultation and notification (as per the Act), a difference which seems to elude our council. The point remains that there are matters with the Fitzroy subdivision proposal which mean the application should have been notified. Notifying the application would have automatically ensured consultation and what Jim refers to as an "inconvenient truth" is exactly that - a truth which, from the council's point of view, is an inconvenience.

Given the previously unknown historical events now disclosed by Jim, perhaps we can have the area declared an historical battle area? As "Wounded Knee" is already in use and, in any case the knee is but a secondary participant here, we could call the area "Tucker's Nose" and the incident itself "The Battle of Tucker's Nose". Maybe the knee's owner will appear and give us his version of the incident.

Paul Catchpole, New Plymouth