

Stadium debate not over yet

I would be the last person to criticise the rugby community for going for the best deal it could get over Yarrow Stadium.

I've reported on rugby all my life, love the game, feel the pride when "my" team – Taranaki, Hurricanes, All Blacks – is showing the world how good "we" are. How could I be any other way growing up in a world where rugby was everything.

But if I've learned one thing it's that life is never straight-forward, and the debate over what to do with "our" stadium has exceeded all others for its opaqueness, and it may not yet be over.

It didn't look that way earlier this year when stadium owner Taranaki Regional Council came out with what looked like a big range of options to fix it. The choice looked easy – fix the earthquake problems and do some upgrades.

As someone from the council said (although not for publication) you only get one go at something this big, so you gotta go for it.

That turned out to mean fixing the stadium was a one-off chance for TRC to bill the whole of Taranaki with a big rates rise so it could build something extra-special. We would be the envy of New Zealand, with the best regional rugby stadium in the country, and a 1000-seat convention centre to boot. We'd get more All Blacks tests, outsiders would flock here, the economy would boom.

That golden picture was painted in hundreds of pages of words (French/Latin bureaucratic words, rather than Anglo-Saxon ones) churned out in numerous TRC reports that were replaced, changed and augmented as the process of convincing us rolled out.

That's where it got murky. The convincing stalled. It turned out there are other sports and leisure pursuits in Taranaki these days and they rightly feared all our money would be sucked up into the stadium grand plan and there would be nothing left to build urgently needed facilities for sports like basketball, whose participation rate in NZ schools exceeds rugby's.

TRC's answer was machiavellian. It pointed to its legislative foundation, which says it can't pay out for any other arena than Yarrow, and anyway the three district councils should be doing that - overlooking the fact those councils' ratepayers would be paying again...the same ratepayers TRC is indirectly touching for the stadium.

People have already been generous about this. Few have spoken up against the basic need to fix the stadium. But the additional stuff the main tenant wants done - nearly 30 items – relates mainly to rugby or operating a convention centre, which ignores an earlier pledge by TRC to develop a multi-sport facility that more than one sport could call home.

A significant number of things on the wish-list are nearing the end of their lives, which means they should be covered by TRC's depreciation fund (a point raised by Sport NZ). Nobody from either TRC or the New Plymouth District Council (which manages the stadium) has talked about that.

There are also unresolved questions about insurance and liability. We see vague comments that such things are still being investigated; so then, what is the exact status of that? Is TRC hoping we'll get sick of asking and it will all just go away?

The main concern about this deal is its eventual cost. As at least one submission to TRC said, preliminary estimates are one thing but experiences in Christchurch, Wellington and Kaikoura show the final expense of anything to do with earthquakes is always higher than expected.

TRC has allowed \$1.6 million in leeway, but here's betting the cost overruns will be much higher than that, in fact probably enough to eat up the \$5.6 million the council so generously lopped off the amount it says it will now spend (\$50 million).

That kind of thing got them into trouble in the first place when they attempted to make the stadium and Rugby Park a multi-sport venue.

The cost overruns of rugby-oriented improvements undertaken in the 2015-25 NPDC stadium management plan were so great that everything else on the priority schedule – items that were meant to broaden the stadium's usefulness – had to be postponed. Indefinitely, it turned out.

What TRC is telling us now is fixing the two stands is not enough, because parts of the stadium are worn out and out-dated. Their renewal is imperative, and what better time to do it? Even fervent rugby fans like me are left wondering about that.