

Lateral thoughts on stadium fix

I want to put some ideas to you. Unusually for me it's on the same topic as last week, Yarrow Stadium...but needs must.

Last week's column criticised the way Taranaki Regional Council has handled the stadium problem, so it behoves me to come up with a few ideas on how the whole mess could be fixed without too many people feeling alienated.

Public feedback on TRC's decision to go with a \$50 million revamp of the at-risk stadium has been largely negative, judging by Facebook comments, letters-to-the-editor and a Neighbourly poll (76 percent against).

Those who know about the legal role of local bodies under the Local Government Act argue that councils cannot fund private enterprise on little more than speculation when it comes to wider public benefits.

So, here's some lateral thinking on what might make people happier.

Given South Taranaki and Stratford district councils are far from thrilled about shelling out to refurbish a stadium in New Plymouth, TRC could give it back to New Plymouth District Council, whose ratepayers are going to pay nearly 80 percent of the cost anyway.

Step two would be to assume TRC has done us a favour by broaching the idea North Taranaki ratepayers are willing to pay an average \$87 a year in extra rates for the next 25 years to fund the borrowing of nearly \$40 million for sport.

Step three is to have a closer look at the stand repairs. None of the eight options produced by TRC included repairing the West Stand and demolishing the more problematic East Stand, which needs to be gutted for bracing to be installed.

TRC has not to my knowledge released detailed engineering reports on the earthquake strengthening. It says broadly the costs will be about the same for both stands; however, I've heard from a rugby source the West Stand will cost less.

If that's true, my fourth step proposes the West Stand be repaired and the East Stand removed. That leaves nearly 5000 covered seats plus the media facilities and some corporate boxes (the East Stand has only 3332 covered seats).

With the West Stand seats, room for 15,000 spectators on the terraces, and extra temporary seating installed along the eastern touchline, the stadium could hold as many people as the \$50 million option adopted by TRC. Fine for All Blacks tests, surely. And done for a fraction of the current proposed budget.

Step five would be to extend the ground boundaries the metre or so needed for it to accommodate cricket tests (the East Stand prevents that). I know cricket is happy to stay at Pukekura Park and that needn't change – except for international five-day test matches with their priceless TV live filming, involving hours of cameras panning around the province for all the world to see.

The next step would be to build new facilities on the eastern side of Rugby Park to accommodate multi-sport usage, so sports other than rugby could call the park home. That might include an artificial turf field for hockey, for example. What about athletics on the main ground? Or show-jumping? All available at hireage costs that are not prohibitive, as now.

Outdated equipment at the stadium like the lights should be replaced using money accumulated in the stadium trust's depreciation account. If rugby and other sports want headquarters at the park, they pay for it themselves.

Whatever is left from the \$40 million (presumably many millions) could be spent on doubling the number of basketball courts at TSB Stadium to six and improving the aquatic centre so it's suitable for year-round training in the 50m pool.

These may seem like wild ideas, but from my reading of voluminous documentation assembled on this issue by TRC, broader thinking has been absent. The council approached the matter through a narrow lens aimed at maintaining rugby's historical supremacy as Taranaki's premier sport.

That might have worked last century, but given the growth of leisure and sporting alternatives in the new millennium, this seems like a chance to spread public funding more evenly and fairly.

Would NPDC like the stadium back? Probably not, given it's previous unhappy experience with owning it. However, TRC deputy chair David Lean challenged district councils to put money towards sports facilities, and that's not a bad idea.

NPDC would get to spend its own ratepayers' money on the facilities it decides New Plymouth needs and TRC could get back to being a regulator...something at which it's more adept.