

Vomitory for a dead rat

An extraordinary amount of research has gone into this column.

I've spent all of 10 minutes on the internet searching for the origin of “swallow a dead rat”, an exercise that found no definitive answer but exposed a world of people dying from bubonic plague and rat lungworm disease, or nearly expiring after watching a seagull swallow a rat whole (the word “ratatouille” featured), finding a rat in their takeaway salad, or seeing David Walliams eat a barbecued rodent on a Bear Grylls safari.

The expression was used at a New Plymouth District Council meeting by noted environmentalist Dr Stuart Bramhall when she submitted to councillors faced with a “yes” or “no” decision on Yarrow Stadium.

She thought they were being bullied by stadium owner Taranaki Regional Council into agreeing to spend up to \$50 million on restoring and enhancing the earthquake-sidelined rugby ground.

Some councillors agreed, and used the dead rat analogy freely throughout their debate. You now know that the rat was eventually chowed down, although five councillors declined to swallow – Brown, Chong, Biesiek, Merrick and McLeod.

My rat research was nothing compared with a couple of days I spent reading hundreds of emails and documents exchanged between the two councils since April last year discussing what to do about the stadium.

I used the Local Government Official Information Act to get them (a first for me) and they reveal a tortuous (and tortured) process of negotiation between TRC bosses hellbent on building a rugby palace and their NPDC counterparts trying to rein them in.

If you agree the \$50 million outcome (costing the average North Taranaki ratepayer \$80-plus a year for 25 years) is a dead rat, believe me when I say it could have grown to roadkill possum proportions if TRC had got its way.

Last November, TRC chair David MacLeod suggested in a letter to New Plymouth mayor Neil Holdom that TRC could raise up to \$60 million, so long as NPDC matched it with the same amount, resulting in a project costing as much as \$120 million.

Hang on though - nearly four out of five TRC “ratepayers” also pay rates to NPDC. Since they pay 78 percent of TRC's rate take, the double hit on them to

pay back \$107m (NPDC's \$60m share and \$47m for the TRC's) would on average have been about \$170 a year.

Holdom wrote back that NPDC would consider extra spending above the estimated \$33m for repairs (up to \$50m), but "the need for a more substantial project needs to be carefully considered. If we are looking at spending \$100m+, then is an upgraded Yarrow Stadium that also caters for a number of other sporting codes the best value for that expenditure?"

In the same November letter, MacLeod reminded Holdom that TRC has a legal right to ditch the stadium at the stroke of a pen, something his council would probably do if it was a commercial entity.

He magnanimously wrote, however, that such a course would not be in the spirit of councils working together for the good of the community. Nice thought, but when NPDC councillors finally got to discuss the project this month, TRC's collegiality had apparently vanished.

The New Plymouth council meeting learned that if it didn't agree to the \$50m deal there was every chance the regional council would cut and run (my words) and New Plymouth would get the stadium back again – in a greatly impaired state and with a \$4.2m debt.

Earlier, TRC had asked stadium users (that is, mainly rugby) for their Xmas list and presented that to NPDC as a demand in which many items were marked as high priority. NPDC sent it back with the priorities modified back to a different reality.

They include upgrading the lights (at the end of their life) and repairing the turf, part of which had its complex drainage damaged by heavy machinery preparing the stadium for a major rugby event.

The last emails released to me have TRC rejecting NPDC's suggestion that the regional council (the legal owner) should now take over the restoration project (NPDC, the operator, having so far spent hundreds of hours investigating the problem).

TRC said no, it was up to the operator to do all the work – under TRC supervision, of course.

I learned a new word from all that reading – vomitory, an architectural expression for exit. It also refers to over-eating Romans spewing up to make room for more.