

Shrewd tidy-up for NPDC's new term

Tidy. Or perhaps “tidyish” is the best word to describe what’s happened in Taranaki’s local body elections and their aftermath.

Some councils got plural new faces, especially New Plymouth, where the district council doubled its female membership to four, close to the national average.

The two re-standing mayors in Stratford and New Plymouth got back, while South Taranaki had a smooth transition of power. Taranaki Regional Council remained mostly intact, although the Yarrow Stadium debate may have reduced the vote counts of some.

What will the new term bring? In New Plymouth, there are clues in the announcement of a new committee structure, some new committee chairs and, most important of all, a significant change to the timings of the council round.

The six-week round is the succession of council committee and community board meetings that peaks each month with the full council meeting.

Last term’s round was messy for those holding the reins. Key issues and problems tended to surface at early meetings in the round held by the community boards and the Māori committee, Te Huinga Taumatua, and feature in the media before all the councillors were aware of them.

This coming term, a kind of “mega-committee” (my label) - headed by top-polling councillor Stacey Hitchcock and deputy-chaired by Mr Safe-Pair-of-Hands Richard Handley, and open to all elected councillors – will meet first at the start of each round.

Meetings by community boards and Te Huinga Taumatua have been pushed down the round schedule to ensure they follow the Hitchcock-Handley mega-meeting, by which time there should be no surprises about topics threatening to become issues du jour.

I’m all for the council operating as efficiently and tidily as it can, but worry whether this new strategy reduces the opportunity for those close to community coal-faces to raise the alarm.

Community boards and Te Huinga Taumatua have been effective first bases for public consultation. Their members live in your neighbourhood, will take your phone call when you’ve got a problem the council needs to fix.

No doubt those functions will continue, but nothing gets a council stirring its dags more quickly than a pre-emptive news item. *Taranaki Daily News* has reaped some important stories from first-up exposures at those early meetings.

A community board is less likely to go into committee when dealing with a first-time district-wide issue, no-doubt relishing its role to pass local views on such items back to the central power.

Given its membership is much closer to head office, will the mega-committee be more easily manoeuvred by pre-emptive pre-meeting “briefings”, and therefore not quite so open to media scrutiny?

It also has something that may be unprecedented, something that appears to signal the significance of the meetings schedule change – a non-elected member to be appointed by the Māori members of Te Huinga Taumatua. That person will have full voting rights.

Is such an arrangement a concession by mayor Neil Holdom that the effects of his new schedule and committee structure need at least a semblance of mitigation?

The council's numerous other committees and link roles continue as before, although some have amended names and – also unusual - a couple will be chaired by new councillors, Dinnie Moeahu (age and accessibility) and Amanda Clinton-Gohdes (community funding investment).

Re-elected seniors all have chairing roles, with one exception - Murray Chong. He's on noticeably few committees and won't be chairing anything, even though he was one of the highest-polling councillors.

I suspect he scored well in the election because he's good at highlighting potholes (although big ones in the East End Reserve carpark have eluded him) and their policy equivalents, and making a fuss on social media, on TV and at council meetings broadcast live on the internet.

Maybe that's why for full council meetings he's been shifted down the council table to its furthest reaches, a long way from his seat last term when he was near the top...but also further away from the calming ministrations of re-appointed deputy mayor Richard Jordan.

At the council's swearing-in meeting this week, Chong moved a motion to take away the voting rights of the non-elected member of the mega-committee. But nobody would second it, so it was dismissed by the mayor before anybody had time to have second thoughts.

Last term, Chong would have been supported by fellow dissident councillor Horse McLeod (retired). The very first meeting of this term was obviously too soon to see if anyone new might fill the role of second stirrer.