

Why cut what we pay for wisdom?

At the obvious risk of getting offside, I suggest we pause over whether Taranaki's local body politicians ought to donate some pay to charity during the Covid crisis.

Mayors Holdom and Nixon and their chief executives have announced they'll drop their salaries by 10 percent over coming months to recognise...well, I'm not sure what.

They said it was a nod towards those who've lost their jobs or had pay reductions, but still face rates and mortgage payments. The mayors were probably influenced by the Prime Minister declaring she will chop her salary by a fifth over the next six months.

Expectation is generated by grand gestures.

But at international level and probably national, such actions are political and in my view unfair, given most elected leaders are not overpaid for their normal workload, let alone the one faced now.

The lockdown has forced councils to cut back on services, but key people in their governance structures now have a bigger job than usual to re-plan our future.

They normally work from a 30-year vision plan, a related 10-year long-term plan that is revisited every three-year term, and an annual plan derived from the other two and adjusted according to short-term developments.

All plans are at risk because of the lockdown and the various stages it must go through.

Local government income is down because money streams from enterprises like swimming pools, parking meters and fines, libraries, construction permits and inspection fees, you name it, have dried up.

All four councils have significant improvement projects on their books (Yarrow stadium for one) and must now re-examine priorities.

Mayor Holdom has given his councillors freedom to make their own choice about donating pay to charity. That's commendable.

But at the risk of being labelled something even worse than a right winger, I want to urge Taranaki's councillors to resist the moral pressure implicit in this debate.

If they're comfortable, do it by all means. I know of one New Plymouth councillor who has been giving part of his council income away for years, without ever telling anyone other than recipients.

But I know others for whom the relatively (to workload) paltry sum is all they get.

When I began reporting local government in 1965, elected councillors weren't paid at all, which led to councils dominated by businessmen. A past enlightened government decided the only way to get diversity was to pay.

But it didn't go far enough, setting levels that aren't quite risible but nor are they sufficient. It was a gesture.

JT col for April 25 – pay cuts

The point is that if we want to attract capable people with a range of skills and backgrounds to a role I regard as equal in importance to national government, we have to acknowledge what that's worth.

To expect them all to take a cut for an already underpaid job is unreasonable at a time when their workloads and the heightened level of wisdom we will be relying on are rising exponentially.

We must have good leadership to get through this. Let's not diminish those we expect to generate it.

Having said all that, I acknowledge I have a beer with a few councillors each week, so make of that what you will; just weigh it up against my 55 years of reporting local government.

On another Covid matter - is Taranaki ready for Level 3? Surely yes, given that as this was being written earlier in the week, we'd had no new cases since April 1.

Even if we'd had some, what's happened over the last month shows there are many everyday activities suited to physical distancing.

For example, house construction is so well-organised you'll rarely see more than one trade on site at any one time.

Safety measures taken by most supermarkets, dairies, petrol stations and banks suggest a wider range of retail could accommodate distancing.

Some commercial and industrial enterprises will lend themselves to safe operation, as will service industries as widely diverse as drive-in/delivered takeaways and lawn-cutting.

Real estate can operate again with limited private viewings, a relaxation that will boost local media advertising.

Conversely, home hair cuts and colouring might be needed a while yet, and re-opened pubs, cafes, restaurants, cinemas and other entertainment operations, as well as team sports, seem a way off (someone reckons golf will be okay).

This far into the lockdown, I regularly see behaviour that ignores the invisible risks of spreading the disease. That suggests they don't exist in Taranaki – at the moment.