

Time to merge our councils?

Why does Taranaki have four councils, one of which can take the other three to court, and impose unwelcome costs on their ratepayers?

Has Covid-19 presented an opportunity to cut them down to one?

These are questions running through the mind of a reader who got in touch to ask what my stance would be. I don't have one yet, but her inquiry got me wondering.

"Follow the money" can be applied to this kind of pondering, given saving cash seems to be the biggest justification for mergers.

In fact, that doesn't necessarily happen, if a report on the Auckland merger five years after it took place is accurate.

As it happens, all four Taranaki councils are currently re-setting their eternal source of dollars, the rates.

Before the plague struck, most were going to hike them more than the rate of inflation.

Now in mid-Covid, we're seeing a zero rise for South Taranaki (helped by raiding its investments), nearly four percent for New Plymouth (which refused to do that), a similar increase for Stratford, and Taranaki Regional Council meeting to discuss it next week.

The uneven nature of what's happening could be cast in a positive light, illustrating as it does the benefits of localised independence (Auckland's outer districts complained about losing that).

But how local is "local".

In the 1980s, Taranaki had nearly 20 territorial councils prior to the great reorganisation of 1989 that produced today's arrangement.

Stratford remained separately intact in that process and if we now have renewed appetite for reform, merging it with South Taranaki seems a logical first step.

But going further will be greatly problematic, a principal reason being central government reluctance.

While the previous National administration edged towards allowing regions to follow the Auckland example in some form or other, the current one says nothing can happen without 10 percent of electors asking for it and the relevant councils investigating it.

That would invoke deep-rooted self-interest, which must militate against a single territorial council.

A metaphor for that appears daily in TV weather forecasts, which for some reason assume New Plymouth and Hawera get the same weather.

While there are many all-of-Taranaki organisations in sport, business, health care, community services and localised central government functions, few are without internal territorial friction.

For instance, one major Taranaki sports body is fracturing itself over a bid by a rural branch to take over governance. Another I wrote about at length suffered from heated south-versus-north animosity.

For that reason, I can't see Taranaki having fewer than two district councils, with a proviso there is even more sharing of resources and staff capabilities.

That leaves Taranaki Regional Council, which from its 1970s beginnings as a tentative waterways watchdog has burgeoned into the powerful owner of major provincial assets, and an environmental animal that seems neutral on the extraction of natural resources, but bullish about taking legal action against sister councils that have serious waste disposal mishaps.

South Taranaki District Council was fined \$115,000 for its part in the Eltham buttermilk debacle, while NPDC faces even bigger penalties for a sewage spill at Bell Block.

If the whole shebang was operated by just two councils, such payments and legal expenses could be devoted to fixing the actual problems rather than penalising many ratepayers.

That last on its own seems a good reason to ask why we couldn't follow Auckland's example and merge regional council environmental consent and policing functions into whatever might be developed here.

My main concern with that would be maintaining transparency in any setup where the polluter might also be the policer.

The current arrangement has other flaws, such as one involving a conundrum over flood protection at Waitara.

An historical twist meant the regional council got as much money out of the Peka Peka Block settlement as NPDC, so two separate local bodies are deciding how some of that windfall might be spent on resolving Waitara's long-standing issues.

Another reason to look at this now is the impending retirement of TRC chief executive Basil Chamberlain, who from the time of the last local government reformation has shown outstanding agility at the wheel of an ever-broadening empire.

During his 30-year reign, TRC has rescued some enterprises that floundered under district council management, and has ended up owning key assets like the port, regional gardens and Yarrow Stadium.

The above are just a few reasons why any timely reduction in the number of governing entities needs a deal of thought. Ideas anyone?