

Time for TRC to revisit Yarrow

So many things have changed since the Yarrow Stadium revamp was adopted, Taranaki Regional Council will be applauded rather than condemned if it decides to revisit the whole thing.

I'd rather that than having to contemplate my rates bill over coming years and wondering about that extra \$80 a year (on average).

I'll be thinking back to Covid-19 and the opportunity it presented to reconsider everything, especially future provisions for sport.

If we're sensible over coming weeks we'll broaden the canvas beyond rugby's current rethink - which was under way before the pandemic – and reflect on patterns of change within which codes like basketball and netball are expanding while traditional ones like rugby and cricket continue to recede, in participation and crowd numbers.

TRC's \$50 million-odd proposal to make the two grandstands safe and grow the east stand's convention capacity is out-dated.

While the case for a facility big and flash enough to attract rugby tests and Super rugby back to Taranaki holds water, it was never a fair way for our councils to look after all sporting interests.

Post-Covid, the TRC's special rate - collected by three reluctant district councils - will now have a greater impact than ever on ratepayers, and will be watched with resentment by struggling sports bodies left out when the stadium revamp was pushed through.

Nobody would criticise TRC if it turned its current wait-and-see pause during Covid into a public review and consultation with sports administrators.

What are the options?

For a start, the stadium doesn't need both stands to attract rugby tests.

They're nice-to-haves, but returning the west stand to its former state - an embankment with seating but no roof - wouldn't affect the ground's capacity.

Restoring the east stand has the advantage of saving some of its function facilities - although retaining it rules out expanding the ground a few metres to allow cricket tests.

That may not be a factor, because cricketing people say the turf at Yarrow would have to be re-laid to accommodate top level matches. And anyway, hopes of expanding Pukekura Park to accommodate tests have not been entirely forgotten.

What of other sport? Basketball and other indoor codes desperately need more playing space. The New Plymouth racecourse stadium is too small, a situation aggravated by convention demands.

So how about this: restore the Yarrow Stadium east stand, expand its convention facilities to replace the racecourse venue, and build indoor courts out over the number two rugby ground, leaving room for extra car-parking.

JT replacement col for May 30 2020 - Stadium rethink

Rugby has two other grounds available within the stadium precinct for training and club matches.

Equally important would be getting on with plans to build a new netball centre and courts at the racecourse, something that could be done in conjunction with renovating the stadium there and continuing to use its indoor court space.

What of suggestions to redevelop the racecourse as the city's main sports and convention centre, a proposal currently struggling for recognition because of the over-arching impact of the Yarrow Stadium plan?

That could be helped if the government accepts TRC's bid for \$25 million in shovel-ready cash for Yarrow Stadium, with that money spent on fixing just one of the stands and demolishing the other.

If the special TRC rate remained but was halved, something like \$20 million from it could be used to develop a new multi-purpose hub at the racecourse.

There's even another possibility that could eliminate the need for a special rate altogether - the racecourse might cease to be one.

Winston's racing industry review (another major rethink under way prior to Covid) might decide Taranaki doesn't need anything more than a training track, which would be best placed at Stratford.

Word is the racing industry is considering whether racecourses in Taranaki's neighbouring provinces are sufficient to meet top level racing needs in the central North Island.

If that happened, how tempted might racecourse owner New Plymouth District Council be to sell off the land for housing, using proceeds to build the hub on a relatively small proportion of the block.

There are other options. Why not build the sports hub - including a new rugby stadium - at Inglewood beside its athletics track, the funds coming from the sale of Yarrow Stadium and racecourse land? What better "neutral" ground to assuage age-old north-south animosities.

But I'm in danger of getting carried away. Let's get back to the main point, which is the need for a TRC rethink.