

Deadly serious picture show

It was far better than any night in front of the telly, especially as we've seen all the decent stuff on Netflix.

And it was local. Relentlessly, fascinatingly so. A seven-hour epic with a cast whose hair jumped about before backgrounds that varied from a flash boudoir, panos of lush city scenes, antique clocks, window dressings, light fittings and wall hangings, but no bookcases to give the impression of erudition, real or imagined.

It was like the first rushes of an uncut movie. Production values were crude, relying on the cast remembering where the buttons were - the button that unmutes, the one that turns the picture on.

Or off. During a rushed tea and toilet intermission, we watched an empty chair and heard the sounds of domesticity, happily minus the noise of a flushing loo.

By now you've guessed the entertainment was not meant to be that at all.

It was a New Plymouth District Council meeting conducted on the new wonder toy, Zoom, which in accidental moments around the globe has revealed elected representatives undertaking the most basic of functions, including one man in Dunedin dusting his bookshelves while wearing no pants.

Nothing as exciting as that happened on Tuesday afternoon and early evening as New Plymouth's councillors and officers – a cast of about 40, plus me and the *Taranaki Daily News* council reporter – participated in what was rightly labelled an extraordinary meeting, that with a couple of brief breaks lasted from 1pm until 8pm.

It was exceptional not because of the odd spectacle it delivered but because it grappled with the downsides of the Covid-19 crisis, which has disrupted the council's planning processes, cost it something like \$7 million in income, and denied its six new councillors the usual sedate introduction period of breathing through their noses.

They got to open their mouths, a lot. That meant some exasperation for their experienced colleagues, the exception being Murray Chong, whose hindsight for "I told you so" moments is as acute as his desire for a new boat marina at the port.

The newbies were full of "but the emperor's got no clothes" questions, seconding each other's attempts to redirect what Mayor Neil Holdom and his close-knit ruling cabal hoped would be a smooth response to such things as the government offer of a \$20 million long-term loan to get "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects bumped up what in reality is a timeless queue and into a new employment-generating present.

The money is offered on the condition the council borrows a matching amount, meaning \$40 million-worth of long-term plan items can be done now - long overdue things like flood prevention at Waitara and adequate sewerage at Onaero and Urenui.

No arguments there, but it was some of the other things chosen by the cabal that worried new councillors, mainly because they were never asked to help choose them.

For instance, Tony Bedford spotted, too late, that \$1.7 million will be spent on upgrading the entrance to the car park at the airport. How come, he asked, given the

meeting also heard it may be years before what is now an expensive white elephant (in Chong's hindsight) gets its plane and passenger traffic back.

Another new councillor went so far as to say the council needed to consult the public before making decisions involving such large sums.

At that stage of the marathon, the mayor got a bit grim. Previously full of what the Americans call wisecracks aimed at keeping his flagging charges going, he said there was neither time nor staff capacity for such niceties and the council must grab the opportunity to get big-ticket items done much sooner than expected. Borrowing millions now would reduce the need to do so later.

Another matter that brewed heat was a \$400,000 cut to the Govett-Brewster Len Lye budget. Marie Pearce, chair of the council's Len Lye Committee, was alarmed there was no prior discussion on how that will affect the galleries' future operation.

Protest from her and a few mostly new councillors was met with comment that money will be saved by the temporary loss of expensive overseas exhibitions and, anyway, it will take months to replace the departing short-term joint curators.

By its end, the meeting had cut the rate rise to four percent and handed out community aid; but nobody had acknowledged that in some ways the council is no different from other businesses facing disruption, even ruin. The word "redundancies" was never uttered.