

Let's not encroach on common sense

This column has the potential to alienate 600 property owners - so possibly hundreds even thousands of people.

If you follow the news you'll know what the topic is – encroachment; people making use of neighbouring public land, sometimes without permission.

It's an old and hallowed practice.

I found that out big time when I lived in Parnell in the early 80s, after buying a rundown wreck and spending 10 years crawling around in the dirt to fix its piles and defying a resident ghost in the roof space to stem leaks.

Somehow I fitted that in with being editor of the country's second biggest newspaper and starting one of my own after I discovered I could get it printed cheaply by the city council, which had a big press in its basement and encouraged community committees to put out their own blurb sheets.

Foolishly, it turned out, I took that as a chance to produce something professional-looking. I wrote the stories, took the pictures and did the layout, while a mate sold adverts to the 70-odd boutiques that made Parnell Village so distinct on those days (1980s).

It all crumbled because of one story I put together with a map I drew – showing the dozens of Parnell property owners who had encroached. They were also the ones who bought adverts. We soon closed.

So, you can imagine my trepidation when someone urged me to watch the video of the NPDC's strategy and operations committee meeting last week, particularly the debate about encroaching.

This newspaper ran a lead story about a revelation at the meeting that the district has about 600 encroachments, varying from people mowing and planting bits of reserve next door, to full-fledged claims involving "keep out" signs and houses sitting on or over boundaries to road reserves.

The council is so concerned it has hired extra staff to compile a thorough report about something that has been going on for generations.

Last week's debate was fascinating for two reasons. The main one was a split among councillors about what should be done with a request from someone building a new house at Oakura and wanting to put a patio-supporting wall onto road reserve.

That sounds cheeky until you go out and have a look. Every other property on that bit of street - more than a dozen of them - is already encroaching. The new one would simply line up.

The thing is, you don't notice it because the road reserve is so ridiculously extensive the street could be widened with what's available. If everyone was shoved back to the official boundaries, there's room for a four-lane motorway.

The applicant did the right thing and applied for permission to buy the bit he needs, but council officials said you never know what might happen in the future.

Fortunately for him, two-thirds of councillors saw sense and granted him what's called a licence to encroach for 20 years with right to renew after another 10.

It'll cost him tens of thousands in rent over the three decades, as Councillor Murray Chong pointed out with some glee.

But I'd like to contribute (without glee) the thought that Oakura doesn't want to grow fast enough to need a motorway down to its beach. There's irony in the fact the council just turned down a big subdivision out there - precisely to ensure there isn't rapid growth.

You know - the kind of growth that engenders motorways. Motorways that need a helluva lot of road reserve. Which therefore must be preserved. In case.

Give me strength. My advice to the council is leave it all alone, otherwise you're buying a series of fights that will cost the rest of us a fortune in legal fees and court battles.

Just send a circular letter out to the 600, asking them to keep mowing and planting, and to resist the temptation to put "trespass" signs on land they don't own. And make sure future housing in new streets sticks to its legal boundaries.

The second reason the meeting was fascinating? The cute and immaculately patient little dog that explored the chamber.

Footnote: I know you've had it with Covid, but I want to mention an unfortunate after-effect I noticed when I went to fill up the car. Our regular petrol station now insists everyone has to pay first. The reason: drivers doing a runner. The lockdown seems to have made the risk worth it for a lot more people.