

Pukekura Park is best bet for tests

What are we to make of Taranaki Regional Council not saying anything about test cricket when it announced the latest plans for Yarrow Stadium?

My immediate thought was the “short” boundaries, which have been blamed for New Plymouth missing out on test matches (Pukekura Park also being too small).

Couldn't Yarrow Stadium be broadened now the East Stand is going to be pulled down and rebuilt?

Yes and no. When it comes to cricket, nobody prefers Yarrow to Pukekura Park. Yarrow Stadium is not only too small, but it's elongatedly rugby in shape, lacks a cricket atmosphere, and can have a slippery grass surface dangerous for fielding.

A belief the ground is only a couple of metres too narrow for tests is wrong (it may have sprung from a 2002 report about surveyors finding the ground four yards shorter in length than previously understood).

That misconception has fuelled the idea the East Stand could be easily relocated a few metres east, and we could have test cricket.

In fact, the existing wide space in front of that stand would need to be widened another 26m eastwards to meet the minimum test ground requirement of 60m out from the wickets, plus another 5m for the playing perimeter safety space (2.5m each side).

Without saying so in its latest announcement, TRC is leaving open the possibility of enlarging the main ground, as are local cricket authorities. After all, while New Zealand Cricket currently says it doesn't want any more test venues, that might change in the long term.

But I'm with cricket-lovers - forget Yarrow Stadium. Remodelling and enlarging Pukekura Park is the only way to go, especially now we know what Sport Taranaki has planned at the racecourse.

Not only will the racecourse have several extra cricket fields, it could be linked directly to the Pukekura Park ground via a road down to the elevated area between the newly revamped eastern and southern terraces, which could be the site of a new pavilion.

Half a million has already been spent on top-quality practice nets at Pukekura Park, a first step towards the ground becoming one of international quality and size.

The pitch is already good enough, so the challenge remains size. How can the ground be enlarged?

I don't know the exact answer, but it could start with removing the road (the extension of Liardet St that comes in through the memorial gates) and at least the bottom western terrace. Then there's expanding the northern side of the ground outwards by moving the scoreboard and the boundary. Room for that could be made by narrowing Fillis St to one way.

Even if the existing pavilion is demolished, road access will still be needed into the park proper. No problem: the existing track from Gilbert St that passes along the

eastern end of the fountain lake is wide enough for trucks if one tree was lopped back.

There is the obvious question of what to do with the Sanders memorial gates, since they could wind up in the edge of an enlarged cricket ground.

Could they be moved back a little without offending sensibilities? They don't form a central archway, so I'm guessing each column and its attendant pedestrian gateway and walls could conceivably be relocated. Expensive, but possible.

All that presupposes organisations with a close interest in the park would agree to such significant changes. I'm thinking of New Plymouth District Council and Friends of the Park.

While not ruling out the widening of Yarrow Stadium, Mayor Neil Holdom says Pukekura Park is an unparalleled cricket venue in terms of its stunningly beautiful setting, practice nets and as a family-friendly venue.

The fact his council has upgraded the eastern and southern terrace seats but left the western ones untouched hints at what's to come - the widening of that side of the ground.

Sport Taranaki chief executive Michael Carr says everyone is working to avoid duplication and to ensure each project is complementary rather than competing. He's focused on getting the proposed racecourse multi-sport hub into NPDC's long-term plan.

Which leaves the Friends, a group traditionally conservative about change. I hear South Taranaki park curator David Bruce is the new deputy chairman; what will his influence be?

I'm left thinking of five days of live TV test coverage, during which cameras frequently pan around our province and show it to the world. Priceless.