



Some good things in annus awfulish

The Queen summed up her year in 1992 with the Latin phrase “annus horribilis”, which doesn’t need translation and could be coarsely converted to “backside of a year” (or worse) to describe our 2020.

A dozen of my columns were on COVID-19, with 10 in a row dealing with the pandemic. Others mentioned it in passing, despite efforts to write about something else for relief.

Venerable English media outlet *The Economist* declared Covid the most-mentioned topic in its 178-year history apart from the two world wars.

While Covid shook Taranaki’s equilibrium, apart from economic angst the impact has seemed minimal. Some people adopted mask-wearing and traced their visits to public places, but many didn’t and some acted as though it was fake news.

Such effects as there have been included random shortages in supermarkets, like a pre-Xmas absence of 60-litre refill fizz bottles, an inconvenience rather than a crisis.

Some predictions from so-called experts about the effects on NZ’s economy have been so far wide of the mark as to place such prognoses in the realm of fortune-telling.

The housing market didn't crash. Instead, it went on a rampage and is now so over-cooked as to portend a 2008 US sub-prime mortgages-like ending. But how would we know?

Retail spending went mildly berserk because boomers like us couldn't take overseas trips to last year's intended favoured destination, so instead spent spare cash on new appliances, cars, cotton Egyptian sheets and toys, leaving shippers with a logjam at some main ports.

There was good reason for the Prime Minister to deliver a reserved acceptance speech after sweeping her first general election while in power - the chalice wasn't exactly overflowing with sweet lemonade.

Our local councils made suitable noises about restraint, but I'm unaware they made anyone redundant, more staff than ever earn six-figure salaries, and now New Plymouth's is signalling big rates rises and the hiring of more expert staff to tackle infra-structure replacements falling due in the 30-year cycle, or generated by Taranaki's share of regional popularity as a refuge from big city congestion and lockdowns. Or by neglect. Hard to say which.

Some good things happened. Shane Jones' erratic regional spending spree built on generous previous multi-million dollar grants - to continue our base hospital's redevelopment, save St Mary's and reshape Mt Taranaki's access to trampers - by defusing the Yarrow Stadium controversy.

Along with other media people, right on Xmas I got to see how part of the Jones gift of \$20 million will be applied to earthquake-proof the stadium's western stand, re-sow the pitch and replace the lightbulbs with LEDs.

I could see why the stand job is so expensive. They have to remove the seats and the concrete steps they sit on to uncover the bank, which will have big concrete piles built down to solid ground and foundations installed so it can all be put back again.

There'll be little to see when it's finished, but such remedial and other anchoring work will stop the whole thing toppling forward in a big quake. Let's hope it's never actually tested.

Jones' generosity means the stadium rates impost demanded by Yarrow Stadium owner Taranaki Regional Council will drop back by about half, which maybe helped New Plymouth mayor Neil Holdom decide that now is the time to go for his big increase to fund the council's three waters infrastructure projects.

That hints at cynicism, but frankly we need to trust Holdom on his quest to sort our pipe work.

To give him credit, he had spotted the problems even before being elected back in 2016. I recall him sitting in the public gallery at the last meeting of the Andrew Judd-led council and referring those of us in earshot to a report forecasting expenditure on water. “This is wrong,” he kept saying.

From where I’ve been sitting so far this term, his mayoring looks to have matured to the point where I think we’re lucky to have someone running the ship whose background has equipped him to understand what’s needed.

The other thing I liked about 2020 was the sight of those little dredges circling the lakes of Pukekura and Brooklands Parks. Now, if park staff can get around to removing the daily drop of ponga fronds, the result is going to be worth every cent of the millions spent. Happy 2021.