



DN photo

Why waterworks debate matters

If you mentioned water problems to me when I was a kid the first thing to mind was a mysterious old man's affliction called "waterworks trouble".

I knew it was deadly, because they invariably ended up in hospital being taken care of by the Gummint.

This thing called Three Waters looks a bit similar. Our collective waterworks are getting old and incontinent and the State wants to step in and take care of them.

The problem in both scenarios is the uncertainty of the outcome.

If Taranaki's district councils relinquish our drinking water, stormwater and sewerage systems they could lose a third of their reason to exist. Minding the three waters takes up about that much of the councils' budgets.

In theory, they could lose a big chunk of justification for charging us rates, borrowing money, hiring staff, spending investment income, occupying flash buildings, paying a small fortune for self-promotion, and having so many people elected to sit round their tables.

In its recent report (oddly rated a matter of "some" importance by the writer) NPDC notes it has 66 staff employed directly in three waters operations. The council could lose a lot of expertise if the plan goes ahead.

And a lot of direct say. Taranaki (along with Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Whanganui and Rangitikei-Ruapehu) would be lumped into one of four new mega-groups. We are likely to get just two voices (one representing the three councils, one representing eight iwi) on the governing body, which itself looks as phantom-like as our hospital boards.

The wordage cloaking this initiative - which was originally prompted by the 2016 campylobacter water poisoning in Havelock North – is as obscuring as a Taranaki Maunga blizzard.

I can think of a parallel – our roads. The NZ Transport Agency has long been responsible for the main drags (state highways 3, 43 and 45) while our councils take care of the rest.

How well do we do? Take a drive along SH3/Coronation Ave and brace yourself for a rough ride.

How about the Mt Messenger travesty? What began in 2013 as a sensible locally forged plan to upgrade SH3 all the way north to Te Kuiti at a cost of \$45 million has descended into shambles that will end up costing several hundred million and has yet to achieve anything other than an expensive pair of bridges around the Awakino Tunnel.

What about the highway between Bell Block and Waitara? When will anything ever come of the endless meetings and promises Waka Kotahi has made to sort out patched-up surfaces and dangerous intersections?

If that model of central state care is about to be replicated for what we drink and where it ends up, heaven help us.

The irony is that if our councils decide to hang on to our three waters and go it alone with big rate rises, failure to meet new standards coming up in the reformed Resource Management Act could mean big fines or even staff (or councillors?) being jailed.

Who do we get to prosecute when the State screws up our waterworks? Who could we send to jail?

Earlier this week, I sat through a three-hour NPDC special meeting to discuss these issues. It first heard public submissions, of which there were only three, an indication of what many councillors said later – few if any of us know what Three Waters portends.

Council officers produced an excellent 57-page [report](#) about it. I recommend you look it up on the council website if you want to know what they/we face. I can sum it up in a few words: the biggest local government reform since the great reorganisation of 1989.

The report says while the Government has put up a seemingly attractive case for councils to get out of waters management, many things are unclear. At their meeting, councillors agreed and moved to send a letter back asking for the process to slow down, for communities to be properly consulted and for a plethora of complex questions to be answered properly.

It wants stormwater taken out of the equation because its not a contained system like the other two; it suggests a co-operative system of governance would be much fairer than the suggested one, which mostly removes all the say from people. And...well I suggest you read the report for yourself.

Just don't imagine this is going to go away. Our say in what happens in our backyard faces grave risk.