

30th April 2010 Northern Advocate

Spectators sidelined . . . save 'family silver'

Phil Halse is a six-term Whangarei District councillor and former deputy mayor.

DON'T you just loathe sideline critics? The ones who stand on the sideline and yell out "expert advice" to those who are in the game and giving their best to achieve a desired outcome. Those playing may be in for a win or a loss, but they are giving their best. What does the Northland Regional Council hope to achieve by being a spectator in the single most important debate ratepayers should be having?

It is 21 years since the last reform of local government. Isn't it about time we looked at ourselves and asked: can we do things better?

Can we grow more quickly as a province if we combine our best staff and resources and blend them into a new structure?

Let's look critically at what is going on in the four Northland councils. Are they creating the blueprint for Northland's future? I hope not, because Northland can do far better.

Lifting Northland's game is what the current review of our local government is all about. An independent expert has looked closely at us, talked to our civic, business and community leaders and laid out the alternatives for our people to consider.

Some, including regional council member and farming leader Ian Walker, have criticised the process we are in. He needs to remember that all that has happened is a new

seed has been planted (ironically by his own council), yet he wants to pull it out roots and all without even a chance for it to establish itself.

That seed needs to grow and blossom. It needs nurturing, shaping and feeding. It needs to be given a structure to carry the weight of Northlanders' expectations.

I have been to several meetings about the governance review and the public are rightly annoyed that all four councils cannot unify their approach to all ratepayers and stay on the issue, which is: "Do you believe one, two or three unitary authorities would be better than our current set-up?"

There has been a lot of political noise coming from the top. We deserve better.

The NRC is crowing about its low debt and wringing its hands about district councils getting their hands on NRC assets.

Actually, those assets belong to you and me, the ratepayers, and everyone knows it is the district councils which provide all the infrastructure and deliver all the services — roading, water, refuse collection and parks.

It is clear the NRC sees spooks everywhere, but we are simply in a consultation process on the future structure of local government.

We are seeking direction from Northland ratepayers. We want submissions on how they see our future and those submissions will be considered by an independent commissioner.



Phil Halse

John Bain is a Northland Regional councillor

ONE of the most frustrating parts of being in local government is watching groups attacking the status quo to feather their own egos or, in the case of Whangarei District Council, to grasp at the assets of the people to balance an appalling financial "cock-up" (using their words). The land, which is destined for sale, was vested, or endowed, to the Whangarei community, at no cost, from the old Northland Harbour Board. The sale can only proceed if the WDC can get approval from the Minister of Local Government. I, for one, would hope that approval is not forthcoming.

In the 15 years since the land was gifted, the land has attracted a lot of "rent" to subsidise the income of the council and reduce the burden on the ratepayers in our district.

So what will happen to the money from the sale, should it go ahead? Will the council reduce the debt that, to me, appears to be caused by an unwarranted new shopping centre project planned for Old Boys rugby club land, where, it is reported that some group, yet unnamed has put an offer of \$20 million on the table with no settlement date included. Poor judgement not to have a confirmed pay-up date to collect the money, and not a good look, not to go to public tender to determine the value of the land.

The proposal to sell any endowed

land is wrong, as we should hold the benefits of it all for the generations to follow. Once sold, never recovered.

Has the council taken capital appreciation into consideration and, if so, where are the figures for us all to see?

I wonder if the 4 per cent annual return on the leased land would be considered low if the real return on capital, including capital appreciation, from 1989 was measured, and if it was put beside the old NRC building or the Blue Goose land.

The public should be gravely concerned that the WDC has effectively cut out the council process by giving the decision of the land sales to only the mayor, CEO and two chosen councillors. This property governance committee is all-powerful and, from the outside looking in, is committing the other councillors to an unseen

liability of decision to which they have no say. Democracy? It doesn't look like it to me. The complete council is responsible for the overrun of debt that, to me, appears an embarrassment.

My thoughts are that once they start selling the "family silver" we are destined for higher rates.

As ratepayers and citizens of Whangarei, we need an assurance that if land is to be sold, it is by a tender or open market process but, better still, we need to know that the "family silver" will still be there for our children and their children too.



John Bain