

EdLines

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Fuss over trust fuelled by own secrecy

WHY THE fuss about the Northland Emergency Service Trust (Nest) buying a third helicopter? I suspect it's because the justification of the purchase seems to be less about providing service for injured or sick Northlanders and more about "because we can".

And because the public purse — via a Northland Regional Council rate — is involved indirectly.

For half the year the third chopper will be based in Auckland, where it will be used for pilot training — something that wasn't mentioned in the expensive public relations company press release announcing the purchase.

It will also be used for inter-

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hospital transfers, which will effectively free up the two Northland choppers for more local rescue work. Has rescue work escalated to the point that we need to shore up this gap before lives are lost? Flying hours have increased — but the number of rescues? Who knows?

A health official quoted in the press release seemed to be extolling the virtues of having a

third chopper flying in Northland skies — did he know Chopper No 3 was going to be based in Auckland? Who knows?

As for the public purse — did the NRC know Nest was planning on purchasing a third helicopter when it approved a public rate that provides Nest with more than \$600,000 a year? Who knows?

Nest chairman John Bain — an NRC councillor — said he withdrew from the discussion about the rate as he had a conflict of interest, and that the NRC went through due diligence in deciding whether to allow the rate. But he didn't tell the NRC about the third chopper. Why not? Who knows?

Fuelling the growing burble about Nest is the secrecy over

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payments to the trust. There's a little more than \$90,000 paid in honorariums. But how much and to whom? Who knows?

Mr Bain declined to say how much of that he receives. Which necessitated a ring around the trustees to ask them directly.

Most don't take an honorarium. The majority of it goes to Mr Bain. So what? He runs the trust. But why not just say how much he gets paid? Who knows?

Mr Bain says the public won't pay for the new chopper — the money will come from a replacement fund. But the public keeps Nest afloat, so it should be told how much the new chopper cost. All the secrecy does is attract unwanted attention.

Nest was subject to a new level of accountability when it became the benefactor of the public purse. It's a level of accountability to which the trust chairman still seems to be adjusting.

If the public is paying \$600,000 a year to Nest, then we need to know how much the cleaner is paid, let alone the trust chairman.

One thing is clear — the level of service the trust provides to sick and injured Northlanders is excellent. But there are fine trustees working for Nest for nothing who are bound to be uncomfortable with the perceived lack of accountability.

Let's hope this is just a bedding-in period as the trust adjusts to greater scrutiny.