

QUITE CONTRARY

with Joanne McNeill



Like rust — rates never sleep

WE ONLY just managed to pay last year's local body rates before the dreaded debt collectors threatened to distraint our tattered chattels, so the recent arrival of the latest, vastly increased demand was not greeted with universal joy.

However, there is a glimmer of hope in the government-subsidised Rates Rebate Scheme.

Don't bother looking for any information about it in the glossy council pamphlets which accompany the rates bill though. It's not there.

There's plenty about what the money will be spent on — mostly parish pump necessities, such as roads, drains, toilets, parks, water, libraries, rubbish, culture/ arts, sewerage, and infrastructure such as the Marsden Pt rail link. All good stuff.

Although arguably, projected expenditure on policy, monitoring, property, building compliance, resource consents, regulations, fripperies such as the Okara Park rugby stadium and other boys' own toys such as helicopters could warrant cuts in currently straitened circumstances.

There's plenty of advice about payment, deadlines and scary penalties, but nothing about rebates for low-income ratepayers.

The scheme operates under the Rates Rebate Act 1973 but was not widely publicised until a review in 2003 revamped limits. For the 2009/10 rating year, the income eligibility threshold is \$21,910.

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While this may sound a ludicrously inadequate annual income to some, for those subsisting under the limit, any rebate is a godsend, even if it is subsidised by other taxes we're already paying elsewhere.

Applicants could be entitled to rebates of up to \$550. A rebate calculator is available on www.ratesrebates.govt.nz

In Whangarei, for the past few years, the scheme has operated out of a collection of low huts near the fernery in First Avenue, just over the bridge from Cafler Park. Applicants turned up when it suited them, with proof of income and the rates bill, and signed declarations. Pleasant council staff calculated the rebate, then wiped it off the rates. All very scenic and convenient, and highly satisfactory.

This year's rates rebate trip down botanical lane, however, was only to discover the usual office relocated without warning, to former restaurant premises in Forum North, where attendance turned out to be a complete waste of time (and parking fees), because rates rebates are only assessed by appointment now and all the appointments were booked out until next week. Ho hum.

Apparently changes were advertised separately in newspapers because mailed-out inserts were already so jam-packed with hoop-la there was no room to include the information.

In these parlous times, with utilities bills, and taxes by any other name, piling up against plummeting incomes, if it comes to juggling the rates and the power bill, for instance, the power is likely to win because power can be gone before lunchtime (or tomorrow morning's hot showers) but mortgagee sales or debt collectors may be delayed until a hopeful ship comes in.

Should ratepayers default because they can't or won't pay — whether on principle or because of hardship — Whangarei District Council rates manager Bill Harris says although mortgagee sales are possible (except on multiply-owned Maori land) and some councils do it, Whangarei has never sold up an occupied property. His approach is to growl, inform mortgagees, engage co-operation, go through the debt collection process or, ultimately, to put liens on properties and recover rates arrears when properties sell, or from estates when owners die.

Life may be short but clearly rates are longer.

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