

JOHN ROBSON on Tauranga City Council...

Inheritance

Let's start at the beginning - Councillors inherited a mess in 2013.

Uninhabitable buildings, failing ICT systems and staff with morale and capability issues, and, despite assurances from management, there were issues with infrastructure in the wider city.

That this information was not public in 2013 is a damning indictment on previous Councillors - either they knew and didn't tell you - or they didn't know.

Whatever the reason, the lesson for voters is simple: Do not vote for former Councillors, their failure to keep you informed clearly disqualifies them from holding public office.

What you did know was that debt was rising, and rates were increasing faster than inflation.

And that led to a big change in Council. Or did it?

What is the state of Tauranga City Council in 2016?

Council 2013-16

First the easy stuff.

Debt is still rising.

Despite disposing of assets valued at more than \$70,000,000, debt is budgeted to increase by \$26 million over this Council's term.

Rates are still rising faster than inflation.

In fact, given current low inflation, real rate rises are not significantly different from that of the previous Council.

Council has invested millions to address the ICT systems issues, but, at the time of writing, Councillors have little idea of the effectiveness of that investment.

Despite repeated requests for an update from management, we have heard nothing for months.

Critically, we have not been given a plan that tells us what is being delivered, by when – and what benefits it will provide.

Without this, I am not confident that our ICT investment will not become a lead story for Sun Media.

The fact that only a minority of my colleagues seem overly concerned about this worries me greatly.

Regarding staff capability and morale, more than a million dollars has been spent on a culture change programme.

And the consultants tell us there has been a small, but significant, change in the culture.

Anecdotal evidence, from staff, suggests that any improvement in morale is due largely to moving into the old Westpac building.

In my experience, real culture change comes from the top, not through a 'bought in' programme.

On a positive note, I believe, on the basis of staff feedback, that the behaviour of the Councillors in the chamber has had a positive impact on the culture.

While the work on the ICT and capability/morale issues has been unseen by the public, the buildings issue has been in the media for nearly two years.

For my assessment of the Council's performance on this issue, please see 'Civic Heart'.

Civic Heart

The 'Civic Heart' project arose from the mismanagement of our buildings.

We needed to find a viable long-term accommodation solution for staff.

However, in my opinion, the Councillors abandoned any pretence at leadership at the first opportunity.

Business people and developers were brought in early and they effectively framed the whole project.

The wider community was not involved early on – as I feel they should have been.

The project scope was expanded from 'staff accommodation' to 'revitalise the city centre'.

And while the 'better business case' approach adopted for the project was appropriate, conflating what should have been two very separate projects created unnecessary complexity – particularly for an inexperienced Project Steering Group.

The results speak for themselves. On Tuesday (from my notes, as the minutes are not yet available), Council determined to:

- Work with the private sector to deliver a new Civic Administration Building on Council's Willow Street site or Durham Street site – the actual procurement method is not yet finalised.
- Consider the cost of relocating the public toilet, car parking and bus-stop infrastructure from Masonic Park as part of the 2017-18 Long-Term Plan.
- Develop detailed business cases for a new city centre museum and replacement city centre library, plus an indicative business case for a 1,000-1,200 seat multi-purpose performance venue for the 2018-28 Long-Term Plan – subject to Council signing off on the terms of reference.
- Set up an advisory group to guide delivery of the Civic Heart programme of work.
- Receive the draft Civic Space Options Master Plan – to be finalised by Council following consideration by the Technical Advisory Group.

To spend 14 months and over \$1.7 million to arrive at the above list of 'decisions' is, in my opinion, indefensible.

Summary

The people of Tauranga wanted change in 2013, and when the results of the election were announced I was hopeful.

However, the lack of real (as opposed to academic) experience in governance, and the lack of large-corporate board-level experience, has been exposed.

The Civic Heart project has been a major and expensive distraction – with little to show for it.

The critical area of ICT, required to provide quality information to both management and governance, has received insufficient attention.

And, in my opinion, the need to effectively lift staff capability and morale remains.

Meanwhile, debt increases, and rates continue to rise faster than inflation.

The change the people of Tauranga hoped for in 2013 hasn't happened.