

is a blue line too much to ask?

It's that time again. Local body elections are on the horizon and campaigning has begun in earnest.

There are huge pressures on local bodies and I admire people prepared to stand and get to grips with such issues as the effect of climate change on our housing and infrastructure.

In our disaster-prone part of the country we need confidence in the priorities they set if we are to sleep soundly in our beds at night. Sadly I suspect that lower rates might not cut the mustard if we crave safety for our communities in the uncertain decades to come.

Many readers will want to hear candidates speak, so we are collaborating with Grey Power on two meetings to enable them to woo voters. We will also hold a meeting in Edgecumbe for mayoral candidates and those standing for the Rangitaiki plains. Details are at the bottom of this column.

Meanwhile, I will highlight one project of importance to our members: the Blue Line Project. You may never have heard of it, because this wonderful, cost-effective solution to many woes has been ignored and buried by Whakatane District Council for the past 15 months.

At the original Ki Mua consultation two years ago, a group of disabled people and seniors spoke of their frustration at having their needs ignored by council and businesses. From this arose Inclusion Whakatane, a coalition of disability groups and seniors, two groups who make up 27 percent of the population.

To highlight the problem, they persuaded some brave councillors to try navigating our streets in mobility scooters. Badly designed kerbs, a lack of safe crossings and potholes put users in danger and leave mobility scooters needing constant repair, their users shaken and bruised. Subsequently a few kerbs were improved.

Knowing the council could not afford to make all streets safe soon, Inclusion Whakatane asked for key routes to be fixed first, along with a couple of new pedestrian crossings. A blue line painted on the footpath could alert mobility scooter users to safe passage.

Simple? Cost effective? Yes. Understood? No. One council staff member later told me there was no need for a blue line as scooter users would soon find the best way to travel.

Seriously? After facing the danger of being stuck on the road several times, their bodies and scooters battered and bruised, eventually each new mobility scooter user – and there are plenty of new ones each year – will find the best route. Clearly anyone who thinks like that has never experienced problems with accessibility.



Over time we have found ways for the Blue Line Project to solve issues facing other community groups.

School children's safety is a major concern for parents. Reluctant to let their children walk to school, they clog our roads with cars as the school day begins and ends. Yet a blue line on the footpath between key places – schools, Kopeopeo, town – could show the safest way for children to travel, routes with good kerbs and safe crossings.

A break in the line at driveways could remind children to check for cars backing out. Parents can teach their children to follow the blue line, even if it is just for the last kilometre before school, alleviating congestion around school entrances.

Then there are tourists and newcomers needing an easy way to orient themselves in our town. It would make life easier for them if we can say (and put on the web), "Follow the blue line," between key places: the information centre, wharf, Mataatua marae, museum, Warren Cole Walkway, Kopeopeo. People who have walked between the domestic



grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

A fortnightly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages. Ruth can be contacted by phoning 027 4308149 or email easternbayvillages@gmail.com.

and international terminals at Auckland Airport will know how useful such lines can be.

This clever, cost effective solution to so many issues was quietly dropped when it was subsumed under the Active Whakatane banner, the new, developing, strategy focused on cycling routes and getting people walking. Some initiatives have begun but not the Blue Line Project. Well over a year after this project was proposed we have yet to see a concrete plan, timeline or trial in place.

Better recreation and alternatives to car use are admirable goals but should not take precedence over the basic rights of disabled people to safely access their doctor or buy a loaf of bread. Both councillors and council staff need a whole dollop more empathy for their plight.

Retired baby boomers are an assertive lot and I can envision mobility scooter blockades of key roads. That just might give able-bodied people a real sense of the frustration felt by others who cannot safely access shops, parks or our beloved library.

I suggest local body candidates prepare for some searching questions on this issue, and others of interest to seniors. Blockades might not be needed if we can vote in councillors willing to listen to all sectors of their community. Most seniors vote so candidates would be well advised to listen to our voices.

Voters are invited to three meetings organised for candidates to present their ideas:

Whakatane

Grey Power and Eastern Bay Villages have organised two meetings at Knox Presbyterian Church in Domain Road:

Councillor candidates: Thursday, September 5, 1.30pm to 3.30pm

Mayoral candidates: Tuesday, September 10, 10am - 12.30pm

Edgecumbe

Mayoral and Rangitaiki ward candidates: Tuesday, September 24, 10.30am cup of tea, 11am to 12.30pm at St David's Church hall in College Road. Please RSVP to Ruth Gerzon if you would like to stay on for lunch.

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