

Let's have the truth... and an apology

APOLOGIES are fashionable at the moment as public figures fill the headlines with their outpourings of regret for their wrongdoings. The admission of a past wrong clears the air. The alternative is denial which only fuels resentment and exacerbates any resolution.

Greytown is a classic example of what happens when generations continue to deny a mistake. Settled in the 1850s, it was located to serve the burgeoning agricultural sector. Unfortunately, they located the town in the middle of a flood plain in an old braided river bed.

When the Government railway bypassed the town in the 1870s due to the risk of flooding, the residents were outraged. New towns along the line flourished while Greytown remained in its Victorian time warp.

Instead of accepting their folly, Greytown rerouted the Waiohine River further away from the town. They made the problem worse by narrowing the river channel through four sharp bends and a short road bridge. The result, however, increased the area of arable land.

In the 1950s after several major floods and replacements to the road bridge, a flood scheme was finally set up. They built a cosmetic stopbank system including a floodway.

What makes the situation worse is that each attempt to fix the problem created a false sense of security. In the 1990s there was uproar that the stopbank to protect the town was eroding. Rather than upgrade stopbanks downstream that had failed four times, the district



and regional council convinced its residents that raising the eroded stopbank by over a metre will only raise diverted floodwaters downstream by less than five centimeters. They even charged the residents downstream a levy for the 'protection' the scheme provided.

The district and regional council then convinced Transit to replace the road bridge, which acted like a bottleneck. The regional council didn't mention that the road leading to it "acts like a weir" flooding many properties.

Now, the regional council has adopted a "comprehensive" approach that includes "risk avoidance" and "consultation". They say they don't have any plans in place until after consultation with affected parties. The regional council has, however, in the new district plan included new designations showing the precise location of future stop banks and additional flood hazard areas. What was once a one in 100-year flood hazard is now a one in 50-year flood risk.

So the flood risk has doubled? Blame climate change, they say.

The new bridge is designed to withstand a one in 100-year flood but such flood water will never reach the bridge as the current stopbanks immediately upstream can only hold a one in 10-year flood event.

Also, the regional council only "proposes" one in 20-year protection upgrade upstream between the bridge and Greytown's one in 100-year protection. In other words, the bridge won't flood but the land (including state highway) between the bridge and the town will.

Does that make sense to you? Well, apparently it is consistent with the yet-to-be-announced national standard for flood protection. All the previous stuff up in the Greytown area are now kosher due to something that isn't law yet.

To put Greytown into perspective, if Alexandra floods the residents are compensated due to the increased risk the Roxburgh Dam poses. Similarly, Horizons Regional Council openly considered paying compensation to farmers whose land would be flooded to protect urban areas.

Diverting floodwaters through crops without compensation is not only dodgy but defeats the point of why Greytown exists. The added protection to the town has increased land prices. Orchards have

been uprooted and lifestyle blocks have sprung up throughout the areas now protected by the raised stopbank.

The culture of denial has evolved to arrogance. The council has adopted the line that Greytown residents use too much water. With old pipes that move and crack in the shingle bed, the water pipes leak and the watertable infiltrates the sewer pipes.

The council solution is, however, to pump more water through the pipes, build bigger sewage oxidation ponds and install water meters.

"The houses are old" was the accepted excuse for Greytown houses being crooked. Shingle beds at varying depths with alluvial topsoil, however, cause many buildings to settle unevenly. Only recently has the council required that building consents in Greytown include a geotechnical assessment.

There is little incentive to address the problem. It creates work for everyone. The key people of the flood protection scheme also live on the edge of the urban area protected. I had a court case recently where every engineer I spoke to explained how their involvement with the Waiohine Scheme contributed to the problem.

None of them would provide evidence as they feared being blacklisted from getting any further council work.

Greytown is entangled in a co-dependence of white and black lies. If the councils are genuine in their desire to consult with affected parties on the proposed Waiohine Scheme they should start with the truth - followed by an expensive and overdue apology.

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