

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

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THE HOTSEAT

First of all a warm, hospitable Southland welcome to all the guests and visitors arriving in our city for the Bluff Oyster Festival. At this iconic event we present to you the gourmet seafood of Southland. We will embrace you with sensuous taste sensations. We will entertain you with music, theatre and dancing. There will be laughter as we celebrate not just our delicious food, but our fertile land; our rivers and coastal waters; our rainfall and hard working highly skilled community. Southlanders can justifiably feel proud and confident about the future.

We produce food. It's as simple as that. The world's population between 1901 and 2005 increased from 1.7 billion hungry people to 6.5 billion hungry people. By 2050 we will have 9 billion people living on Planet Earth and every single one of them will want to eat food. We are one of the most efficient food producing provinces in the world. Unlike Canterbury we don't need huge irrigation schemes because God irrigates the land for us. Our weather is our wealth.

But wait, there's more. We also have brains. Burt Munro is our hero because he was resourceful; inventive; innovative and took huge risks. At present I'm encouraging Southlanders to take a risk by investing in our Auckland Island pigs' project. I know it's outrageous. All the top universities throughout the world, including Otago, have spent billions of dollars trying to cure Diabetes; Parkinson's and Haemophilia. Likewise the huge multi national drug companies have spent billions of dollars on research. How is it possible that they have all failed, yet a tiny provincial city like Invercargill with its very modest Southern Institute of Technology; the Mayor's Contingency Fund; a few Auckland Island pigs and a very small Anzac company called Living Cell Technologies could solve all these epidemics? It all sounds too good to be true. Like, the tooth fairy has come to save us. "Yeah right"; you may be thinking and justifiably so.

Invercargill doesn't have a reputation as a centre for international bio-tech research, yet overnight we could become the epicentre of a new and exciting industry. Or it could all go offshore because of the dithering of successive Health Ministers. I want us, as a province, to support the Living Cell Technology initiative both politically and financially. We seized the initiative with the Mayor's Contingency Fund, but now we have to make sure we hold on to our advantage.

This is an impossible time to get Council investment because we are consumed with anguish and guilt as we try to set the rates. The increased costs of water; roads; rubbish; parks; pensioner housing and other core responsibilities of local government have increased dramatically. When we try to cut back on 'luxuries' such as the Bluff swimming pool there's a public uproar.

I've come to the conclusion that regardless of how much time Council agonises over the budget, we should be honest and admit to the public that rates will never be fair. Rates are a blatant, blunt property tax. If we have an 8% rates increase, it means the average residential ratepayer in Appleby will pay \$1 more per week, whereas the average residential ratepayer in Georgetown will have to pay \$2 more per week. Is that fair? Of course it's not. But this year's rate will be completely skewed by property valuations. Residential rates will only increase by about 5%, whereas average commercial rates will increase by 10%. Is that fair? Of course it's not, but they are paying for Vibrant City and the Rugby World Cup.

Councils are a small cog in a big government wheel and though we are important at a local level, we have very little control over parliamentary legislation or compliancy costs. The biggest cost increases we face are imposed on us by government. All I can promise you is that both Councillors, senior staff and myself as Mayor will do our very best for the city of Invercargill.