

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

SOUTHLAND TIMES, 25/4/09

THE HOTSEAT

One of the responsibilities of a Mayor is to act as a final Court of Appeal. When all else has failed, when all hope is lost, residents want to see the Mayor. Of course, 90% of issues are settled by the Council's staff or various Council Committees, but when the proverbial turns to custard and one of the parties involved feels passionately that justice has not been done, then I'm the last resort. This happened over the Hedgehope landfill site; the Scottish Hall demolition, and the Clifton sewage stench. I often have to face the wrath of public anger, or the desperate pleas of those who are most affected. At present the two most emotionally charged controversies I'm trying to resolve are the demolition of the Bluff Swimming Pool and the establishment of an urupa (Maori cemetery) in Mason Road.

Our most significant asset, Bluff, is our region's port and naturally is powerfully linked to the wild southern oceans. Being an excellent swimmer will often be a matter of life and death rather than simply sport and recreation. I believe we should develop a master plan for waterfront cafes; a marina and hot spa pools next to a small learners' pool. The old Bluff pool could be re-established as squash courts or filled with sand and used for beach volleyball. I'm sure there are alternatives. Most cities have developed their ports for recreation as well as for shipping services. Wellington and Auckland are excellent examples, followed closely by Nelson, Gisborne and Napier. Instead of leaving the locals of Bluff feeling demoralised and helpless against the machinery of local government, we should inspire them with bold new proposals, on the clear understanding that it may take a decade for work to begin.

The issue of the urupa on Mason Road is even more complex. It's perceived as part of the upsurge in Maori influence as a result of the Maori Party/National Party alliance. It's somehow become mixed up with the Seabed and Foreshore controversy along with a proposal for Maori prisons. In fact this is not the case. I first heard about the urupa proposal in 1997 when Mayor Harrington's Council decided to sell the land to the Iwi for an urupa.

When I was re-elected in 1998 we were taken on a Council tiki tour and we inspected the Mason Road site. It seemed perfect. There were no houses in the area that we could see and Council had been gifted the land by the Crown. If we had established the urupa immediately there would have been no major problems. Unfortunately there was a dispute over the lease and legal action further delayed development. It was during this period that the lifestyle block emerged. People loved having all the benefits of a city, but the freedom and privacy of a rural setting. Farms all around the city fringe were subdivided and the Mason Road area was no exception. Suddenly the proposed urupa was surrounded by million dollar homes. Most of the new settlers had no knowledge of the proposed urupa. In fact most didn't know what an urupa was. LIM reports didn't mention it. According to newspaper articles many urupa around Southland were struggling to survive and a new large central urupa with beautiful rural views would certainly hasten their demise.

It seemed unlikely that the Mason Road urupa would happen for numerous reasons in their lifetime. A small public notice came as a real shock to most of the life-stylers and naturally many objected. It would be simplistic to dismiss them as a bunch of bigoted, racist, rednecks. I attended one of their meetings and a significant number were of Maori descent. I believe it was a clash of dreams in a city where dreams are possible. The lifestyle block is about fulfilling the 'great Kiwi dream' - a paddock for your daughter's horse; some free range chooks; room for a subsistence farm if the economy completely collapses; plenty of room for 'the boat'; kids playing with the dog on the trampoline. It appealed to the rugged pioneer, yet upwardly mobile man of the land. These nouveaux pioneer families migrated out of suburbia in their droves to escape the noise and social friction of the big smoke. To suddenly have a Maori cemetery within 30 feet of the nearest life-styler is causing alarm. They came to escape the city and now it's following them. They don't want more traffic on their road. Whether it was a bowling club, an aviation school or an urupa, they would object.

From the Iwi's point of view an urupa is of huge cultural significance. They had hoped to avoid lengthy and costly legal appeals. The present situation could become a disaster. How would you respond if you were the Mayor of Invercargill?