

# Ongoing saga of Rotorua's council, Lake Rotoma and sewage - Richard Prebble

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Te Rotoiti Bay, Lake Rotoma. Photo / Stephen Parker

## OPINION

Last week the Rotorua City Council sent me an email inviting me to make a submission on its 10-year plan. Among other things, the council in July this year will require Lake Rotoma ratepayers to pay \$45,000 for a sewage scheme we neither needed nor asked for.

I live in a decile 10 neighbourhood.

Many of my neighbours are pensioners on fixed incomes. They cannot pay \$45,000 or \$88,000 if paid back via rates over 25 years. I have rounded all the figures.

House sales at the lake are falling through. Many fear they will lose their homes.

The council invited me to “share your views on council’s preferred options”. I am sharing them with you.

Around 15 years ago the council called a community meeting and said that concern over the Rotorua lakes' water quality had caused the regional council to declare all our septic tanks illegal.

"We are the district council. We are here to help. If we moved quickly there is a government subsidy. The council will install a sewage scheme that will cost each household no more than \$3000."

I was alarmed. As a former politician and a former engineering company director I know to never undertake a project for a government subsidy. Only undertake a project because it makes sense. Any subsidy is a bonus.

The sewage scheme made no sense. Lake Rotoma's water quality exceeds the regional council's target. With only 300 houses and room for no more than another 40, the lake's water quality will always be good.

The proposed technology was risky and high maintenance. A holding tank and pump are installed at each house. Sewage is pumped kilometres to a sewage plant, a fancy name for a community septic tank.

I did my own calculations. On site disposal was cheaper and less risky. The council could get a good price for 300 septic tanks that met the new regulations. Contractors would give a good price to install 300 tanks.

No resource consent issues, pipes, pumps, maintenance or building risk. The capital cost for on site disposal was \$10 million. With the subsidy, no cost to households.

I wrote to the regional council pointing out that Lake Rotoma already met water quality targets.

I wrote to the district council pointing out that for a small rural community with no shortage of land, on site sewage disposal was a better option.

From the replies I realised I could only stop the sewage scheme if I ran for mayor and regional council. Public life has cost me two marriages. I was not willing to risk a third.

How did the scheme escalate from \$3000 a household to \$45,000?

Without waiting for community feedback, the council purchased a farm outside the catchment area for the sewage plant. After buying the farm the tests revealed the farm was inside the catchment. Sewage would be

pumped kilometres, processed, and then the outfall would work its way back into the lake.

“We will ‘future-proof’ the plant,” said the council.

Then iwi took the council to the Environment Court saying the farm was a sacred burial site. The court threw out the scheme.

The council negotiated with iwi to lease from Māori a site iwi did approve. The council now said the scheme would cost each household \$14,000.

The project has been a disaster. The council blames consenting issues, something you would think the council has expertise, Covid-19 and inflation. The council selected the wrong technology.

When Lake Rotoiti was added to the scheme a new technology was chosen for that lake.

The capital cost of the scheme including Lake Rotoiti, 700 households, is \$56 million.

You as a taxpayer are contributing \$16m. The regional council \$9m, and the Rotorua council whose project it is, just \$1m. The 700 households, \$30m.

When Rotorua was promoting amalgamation the councillors said, “Join Rotorua and any future sewage scheme’s cost will be spread over the city”.

Realising the costs were blowing out the council adopted a new formula, those who benefit must pay.

The Oxford Dictionary defines benefit as “an advantage that something gives you”. There is no advantage to Rotoma residents being unable to sell our homes and being prevented from installing cheaper on site sewage disposal.

At the “consultation meeting” the councilors put the responsibility on to the previous council. Their solution is to ask the taxpayer for another \$10m. They have not been watching the news. They will ask the regional council to adjust its contribution for inflation and will consider doing the same.

If there had been no subsidy the council would acknowledge: The Health Department never required the sewage scheme; Farming has caused

lake nitrification; Pure lakes are a community benefit; the project is the council's snafu; The costs should be spread over the city.

**Richard Prebble is a former leader of the Act Party and a former member of the Labour Party.**