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EDITORIAL: KAPITI'S HERITAGE

OUR REGION, Horowhenua/Kapiti, is distinctive, and we need to treasure it. We want to attract visitors, investors and new residents, but not at the expense of the landscape and its historic character. After all, that's what we all came for!

Unlike in Europe, New Zealand's historic relics are frequently of impermanent materials – timber, earth, vegetation and soil type – all vulnerable to fire, flood and bulldozer. Developing the land's face without destroying its character calls for effort, discrimination and restraint. We can't – or shouldn't – always do everything that we can. We have to set limits.

Kapiti/Horowhenua is a key region in New Zealand's history. It's marked by two cultures and the structures they've made: meeting-houses, farmsteads, pubs, churches and burial grounds. As guardians of this treasure house, the district council decides for us which structures and landscapes must be protected at all costs, and which can be transformed. For myself, I want the council to look after the totara groves and stone walls of Te Horo, the sand-ridges and kanuka stands of Raumati South, the dune vegetation, river estuaries and wetlands of the coast, or the ancient sea-cliffs and former islands along the skirts of the Tararua range. And I hope that our descendants will still recognise the railway buildings, the middens and eel-weirs, the cottages and mansions, courthouses, towers and monuments.

Many of you will remember that, not long ago, protection of heritage was rare. Here's an example. If you stand at the intersection of State Highway One and Poplar Road, Raumati South and look up at the Mataihuka escarpment you see a steep gulley. As late as 1850 this was a Maori pa, with dwellings for forty people both at the top and bottom of the hill connected by a path. Before road and railway were built, a virtually continuous waterway passed this spot, connecting Paekakariki and Otaihanga. Near the railway, a very old canoe was found abandoned. Nearby, at the foot of the hillside, was a stone wall 40 feet long and four feet wide, built as a canoe landing. Was it preserved for the education of the young? No! First, in 1920 a lot of kohekohe trees were cut for fence posts, and this brought down an avalanche of human skulls. Then, in 1940, Hutt County Council workmen completely demolished the canoe landing. Just think what could have been done with such a heritage site!

At last we are doing better. There are many great initiatives going forward, including the restoration of the heritage trail and the Otaki museum project. Last year Jennifer and I were in Adelaide and took the tram to the seaside town of Glenelg. This is where the South Australian settlers landed, coming on a Wakefield scheme like that of Wellington.. The old Glenelg town hall has been transformed into a very special type of museum. It's not a collection of bits and pieces; it tells the stories of the region. It's an interpretation centre. If the Otaki proposal follows this model it will be a wonderful asset to locals and visitors alike.

Let's look into a crystal ball. It's 2013 ...