

Council votes to keep pool liquid

By John Maslin

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A lifeline has been thrown to the last of the city's suburban swimming pools, with the Wanganui District Council voting to spend \$375,000 over the next five years upgrading the Wanganui East pool.

This commitment stands out in a plan which sees the council making debt reduction a key target in the plan it signed off after two days of debate this week.

Overall, it means rates will rise an average of 4.1 per cent in 2015-16. Residential rates will lift an average 3.7 per cent, farming 7.9 per cent and commercial 5.1 per cent.

Councillors decided the rate

increase will be allocated entirely to reducing debt. It will see \$3.3 million peeled off existing debt in the coming 12 months.

Mayor Annette Main said the council would be repaying debt in eight out of 10 years, something that had not occurred since 1999.

She said that would give future residents and ratepayers choices about how the district developed without being harnessed to huge debt.

Apart from the Wanganui East pool, other key decisions included a reaffirmation to build a wastewater plant that was both affordable and environmentally responsible; \$4 million for earthquake strengthening of the Sarjeant Gallery; similar work on council properties to bring

them to minimum quake standards; and the sale of joint forestry assets.

The proposal to sell some or all of its pensioner housing portfolio is still on the table.

Councillors reconfirmed that pensioner housing would not require ratepayer funding, but decided to work with a community group to review the best use of the portfolio.

And, as flagged in the *Chronicle* last month, a new council-controlled trading organisation is being set up, under Wanganui District Council Holdings, to run a new aviation business venture at the city's airport. Details of that venture remain under wraps.

Ms Main said; "This plan will help meet the challenges we face.

Doing the same things and hoping for a different result is no longer an option."

Getting the council to a point where it was financially sustainable meant reining in debt, she said.

"At the same time we need to look after what we already have that makes our district a place which works for all of us. I have confidence that the vision we've adopted is our road map to achieve this."

She said it was a balancing act trying to keep debt in check without stifling expenditure in areas the community expects.

"It's about looking at different ways of doing things.

"It's to keep people feeling like things are happening in their city even though we're not

spending a lot of money."

Ms Main said the council wanted people to come and live here not only because of low cost housing and ultrafast broadband to run their businesses, but because the city could show off a lot of other things that matter to people.

"We can't attract them here and then close the Sarjeant Gallery or the museum or the Opera House."

The council received 257 public submissions on the draft 10-year plan and heard from 66 of them.

There were a number of ideas flagged at the hearings and the council will work to develop some of the concepts raised.

The council meets on June 30 to adopt the 2015-25 10-year plan.