

NATION/REGION

Councillors smell rat over cultural costs

By ROCHELLE WEST

THE purchase price of the proposed Len Lye Centre site has been revealed amid allegations of dodgy dealings in the New Plymouth District Council.

New Plymouth Mayor Peter Tennent announced at last night's council meeting that the Regent Building, next to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, cost the council \$715,000.

"That was less than the valuation. There's an 8.4% return on that. The return is higher than our cost to capital," Mr Tennent said.

Until now, the purchase price has been kept secret at the request of the seller, businessman Jeremy Thomson.

The building's price was revealed during heated debate over a plan to merge the activities of Puke Ariki and the Govett-Brewster under one planning and reporting umbrella from the middle of next year.

That plan was eventually passed by council.

The council currently considers Puke Ariki and the Govett-Brewster as significant activities in their own right.

Several councillors were outraged by the proposal to bring the district's cultural activities together, suggesting some ulterior motive.

Merging them would make it even more difficult for the public to source and understand the budgets for the art gallery, Councillor Gordon Brown

believed. "Call me cynical, but I suspect that may, in fact, be part of the motivation — so it will be impossible to find out exactly how much the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery does cost us.

"The context of this debate is Len Lye. It comes back to the trust factor. Keep it separate so that everyone is aware of what the real costs are," Mr Brown said.

Councillor Sherril George said she smelt a rat.

"I don't think it's transparent enough, I think it's hurried and I think there is a little bit of dodgy dealings happening underneath there," Ms George said.

While many companies were unbundling their significant activities, the NPDC was doing the opposite, Councillor Heather Dodunski said.

"I'm concerned that by simply putting things together we are not going to be as transparent as I would like to be. I believe this is a hurried decision we are making today," Mrs Dodunski said.

But Mr Tennent said if the public wanted breakdowns of figures, "you can get figures for Africa. If the public wants to know, that's fine".

By merging Puke Ariki and the Govett-Brewster's activities, efficiencies and cost savings might be found, he said.

In June, the council made the highly unpopular decision to fund the \$683,000-a-year operating costs for a centre dedicated to artist Len Lye's work. The understanding was that council officers would pursue outside funding, savings

in existing budgets and admission charges, so that any ratepayer contribution would be minimised.

"Will this create an opportunity for the officers to ensure no extra cost? Yes, guilty as charged. Are there any guarantees? No," Mr Tennent said last night.

Councillor Alison Rumball took strong exception to other councillors talking about conspiracy theories and smelling of rats.

"By and large, I don't see that sort of attitude amongst our council staff. It really perturbs me to hear us bringing that sort of emotive and subjective vocabulary into debate," she said.

Councillor Howie Tamati was also disturbed by the language used by some of his colleagues.

"The comments of smelling a rat and dodgy dealings is inappropriate in this setting, because it does question the honesty of our staff," he said.

Mr Tamati's comment caused huffing and puffing from some councillors and Mr Tennent had to call the meeting to order.

Deputy Mayor Lynn Bublitz said that binding the two activities was an opportunity to get the cost of the Len Lye Centre to the ratepayer down to zero.

"I don't think this is an attempt to fudge anything. I respect our staff's integrity.

"They will fully report all the expenditure and all the budgets in a proper way," he said.