

Park keeper's protest

By HARRIET PALMER - Taranaki Daily News

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ROBERT CHARLES

STANDING TALL: George Fuller, 80, wears a black armband in mourning for about 25 "primeval" trees at the Bowl of Brooklands, including the 400-year-old Puriri he stands beneath.

Eighty-year-old George Fuller is launching a campaign to save a group of ancient New Plymouth's Bowl of Brooklands including a 400-year-old Puriri at New Plymouth's Bowl of Brooklands.

Protesting against a New Plymouth District Council decision to carve a 6m wide road through the section of Pukekura Park, from next Thursday Mr Fuller will spend an hour a day for seven days standing in the path of the new road.

He hopes people will visit and observe the Puriri as well as the 25 trees to be felled and imagine the gaps they would leave.

Mr Fuller was live-in curator of the park for 25 years from 1966. He is a respected horticulturist, pioneering tree-surgeon and holds an MBE for services to the community.

Mr Fuller said the focus of the "personal campaign" was to return a sense of values to an "ignorant council" whose environmental awareness was appalling.

The decision to allow the road was made last week at a council meeting attended by Mr Fuller who said it was "excruciating to watch" as councillors did away with public consultation.

"The insidious part of this project is it so grossly affects the features of the park and they were going ahead with it with so few people knowing," he said.

Mr Fuller yesterday gained an ally in Councillor Heather Dodunski who said the council needed more time to make the decision.

Mrs Dodunski described a council that was put under pressure to vote for the road after facing an "alarmist attitude" from officers who threatened the loss of events at the TSB Bank Bowl of Brooklands.

"I wasn't happy for a few reasons. Really, I couldn't understand the need for speed. It was the first time I had read the report," she said.

The council believes a new road is necessary to allow emergency vehicle access to the bowl since the existing one, built 30 years ago, is now blocked by stabling developments at the New Plymouth racecourse.

Mr Fuller said the road makes a mockery of New Plymouth's international environmental award for the coastal walkway and said the council should be "stripped of its laurels".

While Mayor Peter Tennent was adamant last week the planned road would not affect the puriri tree, Mr Fuller said his years of research showed the tree was an "enigma" with roots only in a 180 degree semi-circle above it and all in the path of the new road.

A council-appointed arborist had not noticed this.

Mr Fuller said earthworks for the road would destroy a shelter belt planted over 30 years ago to protect the puriri. Its water supply would be cut off and the tree would be exposed to damaging

Mr Fuller said a simple solution would be to re-route the road through a piece of racecourse paddock and then link it to the existing road, which would need to be stabilised, but the council had vetoed this option at the meeting.

"They need to retain the road, make it strong. I'm sure there are engineers who can see this done. It's a joke we can send people to the moon and back but we can't build the right road." He also scoffed at the council's decision to allow a large stable development to be built at the racecourse, blocking the entrance to the current road.

Mr Fuller said he was not anti-progress, but feared that a focus on the Bowl of Brooklands as a venue had overtaken Pukekura Park's 133 years as a place of conservation. He described it as the tail wagging the dog.

"It's growing very bushy, this tail, and it's wagging an ailing dog," he said.

Mr Fuller said the special feeling of the park and the joy of walking under towering trees was in danger.

During his campaign he hoped to bring back that awareness.

"I and the family lived close to the heart of the park for 26 years. In a sense I felt its pulse and I've never forgotten that, I still have an interest about what goes on there," he said.

Mr Fuller's vigil at the tree runs between noon and 1pm from Thursday, June 18 until June 24 and he is inviting people to join him. The access is via the Scanlan Lookout behind the racecourse grandstand along Mason Drive or via the existing track from the Bowl of Brooklands.