

Editorial: By George, he deserves it

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OPINION: He doesn't look much like a superhero: He's 80, feels the cold, walks a little gingerly and the closest thing he has to a cape is an old suit and an MBE medal pinned to a pocket.

But to many around Taranaki and the rest of the country, George Fuller, our Taranaki Person of the Year, is a hero. And when it comes to saving trees, not a man to cross. Just ask Mayor Peter Tennent and the New Plymouth District Council.

For weeks the former curator of Pukekura Park kept Taranaki folk and many around the country enthralled with a one-man campaign to save a stand of native trees, including a 400-year-old puriri, safe from a council plan to build a new road down to the TSB Bowl of Brooklands.

It was the archetypal struggle: David versus Goliath; the little guy taking on city hall; a clash of the old versus the new; the purveyors of progress butting up against the protectors of tradition.

George could have made a bit of noise then respectfully withdrawn, his moral convictions and reputation intact. But he believed in the cause and happily traded the comfort of an afternoon nap on the couch for a daily hike to the park, "bitter" winter winds and the possibility of humiliating failure.

"It could have been a farce," he said to the Taranaki Daily News when told of his nomination for Person of the Year, "some silly old bugger standing by a tree in a suit in the middle of winter." But it wasn't. Far from it.

Others were inspired to join George's vigil, write letters to the paper or contact the council.

And soon it was no longer the bizarre story of the old man and the tree, but a seachange of outrage and ideas that gave some intellectual swell to his moral crusade. The council's arborists and engineers were swamped and eventually sunk by ideas that came from George's growing team.

City hall's hand was forced, although both George and the mayor were keen to portray the outcome as a victory for good community debate rather than one for the little guy against the big council.

That's an important part of why this octogenarian is the man we selected to take the torch handed on by the similarly inspiring Ben Hekenui.

George could have used his victory as a stick with which to beat the council, pummeling it over perceived transgressions and blunders.

But he was as gracious in victory as he was in the fight to secure it.

This wasn't about him, he would later say.

"The trees won, George Fuller didn't."

Fair enough, George. Thanks to you, the trees had their victory.

But you deserve the title of Taranaki Person of the Year.