

## **Open Letter to Tararua District Council in response to the [Tararua District Council rates error.](#)**

Thursday, 3 October 2024

Dear Council Members,

I would like to apologise for hanging up on your representative on Tuesday morning when she called me to discuss how I'm going to pay you back for the "arrears" on my rates account caused by *your* calculation error.

She caught me in a bad mood. I had, that morning, been out walking my dog near the Bush Community Park and my sciatica started acting up again and I was in an inordinate amount of pain so I decided to cut across the skate park to head home. At the same time your animal control officer pulled into the car lot and headed into park. I thought it odd as there were no loose dogs roaming around, but thought nothing more of it. We were practically a few feet from the boundary when he called out from behind us, rudely admonishing me for walking away from him and ignoring him! I had heard mumbling behind me and had thought he was on his mobile phone. When I said I hadn't realised he was talking to me he made some snarky remark about us being the only ones there. Did it not occur to him that I might actually have been deaf or hard of hearing?! He then proceeded to tell me off for walking my dog in the park as dogs are not allowed.

Okay, fair enough. I was aware of the signs, but it's not as if I had let my dog off the leash to roam free. I was **not walking my dog in the park**, I was crossing a piece of public land via the foot path with my dog leashed and muzzled by my side. Not only that, but I was visibly limping and using a walking stick. I honestly cannot believe you would be so petty as to pick on someone doing no harm to anyone at a time of day when, you rightly observed, no one else was around yet you do nothing about the countless dogs, I and other dog owners encounter on our daily walks, that are unleashed or living on properties with wide-open gates and wander about unsupervised. These dogs are allowed to terrorise my anxious dog and are the reason he has to wear a muzzle, because God forbid he bit a dog that approached us, it would be my dog that you would decide would have to be destroyed.

However, I digress; this incident was not the reason for my irritation, but serves to set the scene. When we got home I found your letter in my post box about the rates arrears repayment plan proposal document. It hit me like a sledgehammer as I had no idea that I was one of the ones affected by your 'unfortunate glitch'.

I was aware of the problem since December last year when someone in my craft club talked about a friend who had received a letter about an error causing arrears in her rates payments and warned us to check our own rates accounts, so a week later when I dropped off my latest rates rebate request form at your Pahiatua office I specifically asked your customer service representative to double check my rates repayments to make sure I was on the right amount. She confirmed that there had been a calculation error on some accounts, but assured me that everything was correct with mine and that I was not affected.

So, your letter **ten months later** asking my opinion on how I should repay money I didn't even know I owed you, came as a complete shock and left me in a panic as nowhere in this letter did you say how much I owed or what my new monthly payment would be.

I barely had time to digest this when I received a call on my mobile from your representative wanting to discuss how I intended to pay you back!

I could barely hear what she was saying over the din in the background and for a moment or two I wondered if in fact it was a scam call. There was an audible conversation going on in the background as if people were standing next to her talking while she made the call and a phone ringing incessantly with the ringer volume at maximum. It sounded like your front-of-house receptionists have been recruited to make these calls while at the same time dealing with walk-in customers and phone enquiries. It was extremely annoying, distracting and frankly downright rude. In addition to the noise, her casual attitude and fake sympathy over the situation – discussing my options as if she were trying to sell me on a new mobile phone plan – was callous and disrespectful. If you're going to phone customers to discuss such a delicate subject as asking for money they weren't expecting to have to pay, the least you can do is give them your undivided attention from a quiet and private office and treat your customers with respect and compassion.

I tried to be patient and polite, and treat *her* with respect, after all I knew she was only doing her job, so I persevered trying to make sense of what she was saying over the background cacophony. She then asked if I had any questions.

You bet I had questions! I wanted to know how you could send out a document asking for feedback on how to pay arrears I didn't incur without even disclosing how much I would be expected to cough up! She informed me that the amount I owe you is \$256.46 and that my new rates repayment starting **this** month is \$285.06 up from \$170.57 (with the rebate), an increase of nearly 60%!

I know my brain is slow at times, but even in my shell-shocked state I noticed that something didn't add up. Not that I want to owe you a larger sum, but I've been in my house for just over four years and claiming the rates rebate from the time I moved in and since your glitch dates back to 2018 that means I've been charged the wrong amount the whole time. But if my arrears amount... no, wait I want to add something here.

I take offence at being told that I am in *arrears* and that I owe you money. I don't owe you anything. I have never been in arrears in my whole life... *ever*... on any of my accounts. By saying *I owe you* money implies I knew I was meant to pay you a certain fee and knowingly withheld the funds. The glitch affected only those paying by direct debit – a system by which YOU deduct the money from my account; YOU control the amount going out, not me. The whole point of setting up a direct debit in the first place is to ensure that *you* receive the correct amount on time. If you took the wrong amount out then that's on YOU, not me. So let's call these "arrears" what they truly are: your budget discrepancy... your missing funds... your shortfall.

Right, now let me get back to my conundrum. So, if the portion of your shortfall you want me to pay is \$256.46 for 56 months of your incorrect calculation, then how can my monthly rates possibly have risen by \$114?! Anyone with basic math can work out that \$256.46 over 56 months works out to around \$4.58 per month so this is the amount my I would expect my monthly rates payment should have increased by. When I asked your representative to explain how my rates could have gone up by \$114, she laughingly said she didn't know and would have to ask someone to get back to me (I'm still waiting by the way).

It was at this point that I this point that I lost my cool and hung up the phone. If you're going to have the audacity to demand people to pay up for a mistake YOU made then you need to make damn sure that your staff can explain why and how it happened in the first place and how you have arrived at the amounts you are asking people to pay. How can we trust that you haven't made yet another mistake?

I'm assuming you decided to take the total amount in shortfall and divided it by the number of affected accounts and divided it up again by the number of years a person has lived at their address. So my contribution to your shortfall is relatively small, compared to others who have been asked to contribute several thousand dollars, because I haven't lived at my address very long. On the surface that seems pretty fair, but how come you're only penalising the affected accounts? As I just explained, we did not knowingly or intentionally underpay – your shortfall is not arrears but an accounting error – so if you wanted be truly fair you should be claiming contributions to your shortfall from ALL ratepayers not just the random 400 or so who were unlucky enough to be associated with your glitch, especially as those your glitch targeted are the most disadvantaged members of your community. And, if you were being fair you would stagger the rates increase over several months to give people time to find the money to pay you.

Those of us at the bottom of the food chain are struggling to make ends meet and while an extra hundred-or-so dollars a month might not seem like a lot to you – it's the straw that's going to break the camel's back for many of us. With the skyrocketing cost of living I have already squeezed every last penny out of my budget and I cannot afford to contribute to your shortfall or absorb the instant 60% increase in rates payment you expect. My weekly food budget is \$80 a week, it's barely enough to cover the essentials, I've cut out eating lunch and have to put things like cheese and protein foods on a wishlist to save up for them. I guess I'll have to go without dinner as well now. Better that, than you all miss out on a catered morning tea at your next staff meeting. You have forced my hand and I will be putting my house on the market and you can you have your pound of flesh once it's sold. Whether I stay in Pahiatua is in fate's hand and frankly I'm not sure I want to – I no longer have any faith in the Tararua District Council and would rather live in a place where I can see my rates money actually being used to benefit ratepayers.

It's insulting to be made to carry the cost of your mistake while at the same time we are being let down on so many council issues. I was one of several residents who called in to alert you that the overgrowth in the Huxley Street drain needed to be cleared out before the winter. You did nothing about it and during August's unusually high rainfall the drain

overflowed as we predicted and flooded several homes causing substantial damage. The roads in Pahiatua are in a shocking state with potholes and unsealed surfaces, and have caused excessive wear and tear on my bike. Many residents' sewer pipes were punctured during the installation of Chorus' fibre network and as a result homeowners' toilets are frequently backing up and sewage is seeping into the soil, groundwater and even bubbling up to the surface in places. And what is the council doing to repair the sewer lines? Nothing. You provide us with zero public transport in Tararua so those of us who do not have cars have difficulty getting to medical services in the Palmerston North and are limited to finding work in town. And the cherry on the top for the majority of the region is the news that the new Manawatū Tararua Highway, which is not a *new additional* road but is replacing the old impassable main artery between the towns and main centres, will be charging a toll.

Oh, and another delightful aside, someone told me that you sent her a letter claiming **thirty years'** worth of unpaid rates because you recently discovered that her property rests over two titles. She's been paying rates on only the one title all this time and now you expect her to pay "arrears" on the second one. Honestly, it's like you have someone in the basement going through all your records looking for loopholes to exploit so you can squeeze more taxes out of your people like a greedy feudal king or mafia boss.

Let's also not forget that we pay rates to **two** district councils and in addition to Tararua District Council we also pay Horizons District Council for services many of us don't even use since we can't actually get to Palmerston North because there's no public transport!

And while I know healthcare isn't funded by the council, I put it in the same bin labelled *Abysmal Public Services in the Tararua Region*. In the four years I've lived in Pahiatua I have been seen by a different GP every time. When you are a person with rare chronic conditions continuity of care is essential and I just haven't received that in Pahiatua. I last had to wait 13 weeks for a routine GP appointment only for it to be cancelled at the last minute because the GP decided to go on leave and I was shunted on to a nurse practitioner. An elderly friend of mine was recently very unwell and asked to see a GP urgently. She was told the best they could do was an appointment in two weeks' time! A few days later she collapsed at home and had to be rushed to hospital by ambulance – a hospitalisation that could have been avoided if she had been seen when she first called.

I understand the issues and strain the medical system is under, but to be blunt, that's not our problem and to continually expect patients to be understanding and try not to be sick is a lot like the council shifting the responsibility for their mistakes and shortcomings onto the consumer.

Council and healthcare services may be publicly funded, but you are still providing services in exchange for payment, and like any consumer of goods and services we have the right to expect and demand a certain standard of those services. In fact, because these are publicly funded they should be held to an even higher standard. If a commercial business were to keep cancelling appointments and kept customers waiting for weeks they would soon lose

business. And, can you imagine buying a lounge suite and then three years later the furniture store phoned you up to say they'd made a mistake on the price and now they want more money? They'd never get away with it; they'd be had up for breaching the consumer guarantees act. What guarantees do we get on district services?

In your official public statement you say you "are taking full responsibility". I beg to differ. You may be accepting accountability, but you're only taking some responsibility. By making us pay for your shortfall you're shifting that responsibility onto us – the unwitting innocent victims of your error.

Perhaps you could do with some budgeting advice. One cost-saving measure I can suggest is to stop wasting our money on useless policies. You have already decided to make us pay for your mistake so what is the point in asking for our input in developing a policy for how we should pay it? You're already working with people on a one-to-one basis to set up payment plans so you obviously already have a payment/rates postponement plan in place. What is to be gained by asking for our feedback on a developing a standardised policy when each case is going to be dealt with individually anyway? How much money is *this* proposal process and policy going to cost us? I have worked in government and I know from experience what a total waste of time and money proposal documents are. All they serve to do is to placate people by making them think their opinions are being heard, and then once it's over all the information gathered is summarily filed away in File 13 (aka the rubbish bin) and nothing ever comes from them. There is always an initial plan in place before the documents are sent out and regardless of the feedback received; somehow it's always the initial plan that goes ahead anyway. So, just save us the time, energy, stress and money, and just get on with fixing this mess. If you really wanted our input, it would have been better served asking us whether we feel it's right and fair that you are expecting us to foot the bill for your shortfall. Perhaps if you had consulted us about *that* we might have come up with ideas on how to raise the funds without having to put the squeeze on those who can least afford it.

I should note that yesterday, as I started drafting this letter, I picked up next year's rates rebate request form that you sent through in September and noticed the letter attached. When I received the form I had assumed it was the same letter as every year, explaining the steps needed to claim the rebate, and so I didn't read it. However this time I happened to see the word arrears and some figures at the bottom and read further. And there it was, at the bottom and on the back pages, all the information about the money you'd be wanting from me.

When your representative said all this information had been sent out in a letter, I believed I hadn't received it as I assumed a notification of this magnitude would be presented in its own dedicated letter, not hidden away like an afterthought at the bottom of a routine letter most people won't bother to read. It seems to me to be a somewhat cowardly and underhanded approach. If you would like some advice on writing for clear communication I'm available for hire – I need work urgently to pay an unexpected bill.

Readers of this letter may accuse me of ranting and whining, and they'd be absolutely right. Yes, I've given you a piece of my mind, but it's what we've all been thinking.

Yours sincerely,

Skye Bothma  
Pahiatua Resident and Ratepayer since February 2020.

cc: Tracey Collis, Mayor

cc: NZ Herald

cc: Stuff news

cc: TVNZ news

cc: RNZ news