

Banks gets the loo down on NZ's finest

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By JANE WYNYARD

CLEAN-LOO CAMPAIGNER and Tourism Minister John Banks has an invitation to go where no man has gone before — the women's rest rooms in central New Plymouth.

Then he'd think twice about labelling New Zealand's public toilets as inadequate and unfriendly.

The Gill St women's rest rooms, still in their pristine 1936 condition, have been described by many of their regular users as the best public toilets in New Zealand.

You won't find graffiti on the walls, puddles on the floors or unpleasant smells. And there's enough toilet paper to last a lifetime. Visitors are treated to fresh flowers, a lounge with curtains, padded wooden benches, polished floors and the smiling faces of the toilet attendants. There's even a special miniature toilet for the children.

The woman who keeps them that way, Marion Gundesen says Mr Banks is welcome any time to come and inspect her rest rooms.

"I extend an open invitation to Mr Banks to come and see a well-run public toilet," said Mrs Gundesen. "Hopefully, he'll see this in the paper and come down and have a look."

It's a far cry from the dirty, vandalised toilets that Mr Banks claims are frightening tourists away.

In fact, the Gill St rest rooms are so popular that some women will



SITTING PRETTY: Attendant Marion Gundesen (right) and assistant, polytech nursing student Kay Saunders (left), are two of the more familiar faces you'll meet at the women's rest rooms in central New Plymouth.

Photo: KAREN DAY

spend hours in the building eating lunch, meeting friends, writing letters and reading magazines. One American couple even had their photograph taken outside in memory of a wonderful visit.

Mrs Gundesen, who prides herself on cleanliness, is somewhat of a celebrity. The street kids call her ma'am, the solo mothers ask for her advice and she has saved numerous lives during her many years looking after the rest rooms.

"I've had my fair share of threatened miscarriages and suicides here," said Mrs Gundesen. "I have contact with a number of welfare agencies and the police. You could call me a type of Agony Aunt I suppose."

A mother of three grown-up children and a grandmother for the first time, Mrs Gundesen says she loves working at the rest rooms.

"It's like being at home except

you get lots of visitors," she said.

"You never stop learning when you work in a place like this. The other day we had a guide dog in here and I learnt sign language from it's owner. You meet so many different kinds of people."

The rest rooms are also like a mini-information office. Everything you need to know from the times the buses leave to visiting hours at Taranaki Base Hospital are at your fingertips. And of course, first-class clean toilets.

"My customers are always satisfied when they leave," giggles Mrs Gundesen. "Literally."

Mrs Gundesen agrees with Mr Banks that some of New Zealand's public toilets are disgusting, but blames vandals for most of the damage.

There used to be a 24-hour men's toilet on the other side of the building, but the council was forced

to close it down after vandals ran off with the sinks and set fire to rubbish bins inside the building. Fortunately, the women's rest rooms have been left alone.

"There is graffiti all around the place on other buildings but they never touch my rest rooms," says Mrs Gundesen. "My street kids are good to me and they don't touch the building."

Meanwhile, it appears toilets in other Taranaki centres have also been given a clean bowl of health.

Hawera's Mainstreets co-ordinator Kara Fleming says the public toilets down her way are so clean, you could eat off the floor.

"People walk past and say how nice they smell," said Mrs Fleming. "The council are a stickler on their public toilets and they get cleaned about three times a day. Our loos are amazing and we are very proud of them."