

View to a change: New Plymouth's Queen St will be home to the new Len Lye Centre as well as the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

Photo: ANDY JACKSON/FAIRFAX NZ

Len's legacy, our destiny

Projects Lye ahead for city

The ayes had it, and the Len Lye Centre was approved for New Plymouth. Gordon Brown reviews this week's crunch call.

Seldom has a community been so divided for so long.

Debate over controversial plans by the New Plymouth District Council to build a centre to house the Len Lye collection raged for a decade and no doubt will continue, despite the council deciding on Thursday night to go ahead with the project.

But that decision means the saga is over. It's no longer "if" the centre will be built. It's "when". The answer to that is: as soon as Cleland's Construction has finished building the new police station, work will begin on the Len Lye Centre later this year.

Thursday night's 3½-hour marathon meeting centred on a \$750,000 cost overrun. The community was promised no ratepayer money would be used in building the centre, and revelations that the extra money was needed for the fitout were met with despair by several councillors.

"They felt that continuing with the project would break whatever trust the council had with ratepayers, and refused to back it."

"The whole thing stops right here, now," said John McLeod. He was backed by Chris Andrew Judd, Heather Dodunski, Craig McFarlane, Sherril George and Shaun Biesiek. But a majority of councillors

said it made sense to continue after having come so far, and expressed their faith in the ability of the centre trust fundraisers to find the extra money.

Phil Quinney said it was his fourth term on the council and the Len Lye Centre had been an issue for most of that time. Admitting he was no art lover, Cr Quinney referred to previous mayors David Lean and Peter Tennant as visionaries who had been part of a council that made the district the envy of every other in the country.

"We need to be bold and support things that are positive." He also echoed the sentiments of most councillors when he said he had confidence in the Len Lye Centre trust, headed by former council chief executive Kinsley Sampson to raise the remaining \$750,000 once construction had begun.

In his submission earlier in the meeting, Mr Sampson told councillors it was easier to raise funds for a confirmed project that was actually started, rather than one which remained a concept.

Others also referred to the vision of former mayors, with Claire Stewart's name added to the list.

Pauline Lockett emphasised the need to continue their legacy by maintaining the district's reputation as an unrivalled place in which to live and work.

The vote to go ahead was 96, but before they got to that point, there were plenty of surprises for councillors and the public gallery, which was packed with Len Lye Centre supporters.

Perhaps the most insightful, persuasive comments came in a submission from Mr Sampson, who pointed out that nothing of significance happened in New Plymouth without "a raging controversy". The most obvious recent exam-

WHAT IS THE LEN LYE COLLECTION?

The New Plymouth collection of Len Lye works has more than **18,000** items. It includes **16** exhibition standard kinetic sculptures, two of which are in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection; **52** unique photograms; **10** textile works; **14** rare books; approximately **1000** photographs, many

documenting his sculptures; **33** 16mm film prints, several of which are in the collection; **12** linear metres of archival material, in **1200** individual folders in **120** boxes; **530** audio tapes; **1100** slides; **1400** doodles, drawings and prints; **14** kinetic sculptures which need reconstruction or development.



Centre of controversy: An artist's impression of how the The Len Lye Centre will look.

les were Puke Ariki, the coastal walkway, the TSB Stadium, the upgrade of the TSB Showplace, the northern outlet and the New Plymouth Aquatic Centre, he said.

"But we are lucky, our councils have always responded.

"Puke Ariki is now internationally acclaimed.

"New Plymouth's reputation as a leading contemporary arts centre gives us a significance compared to other cities of our size, and ... ones much bigger."

With Lye's innovative works unveiled at the meeting by Len Lye Foundation chairman John Matthews, New Plymouth may never be the same again.

Meanwhile, the main shocks came from two men normally expected to support the centre: John

Maynard and Terry Boon.

Mr Maynard, a former director of the Len Lye Foundation and the foundation director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery pleaded with council not to proceed with the project.

Now living in Sydney, he emailed Mayor Harry Dwyer and the councillors, outlining his reasons and his frustration at not being allowed to be heard.

"I urge you to seriously consider not to proceed with the project ..."

"It makes no sense to demolish the 1998 Govett-Brewster extension, initially built to house the Len Lye exhibition ... It beggars belief!"

Mr Maynard said it was a "fantasy of overvalued local development effects, over-exaggerated cul-



Nothing of significance happens in New Plymouth without a "raging controversy".

Kinsley Sampson
Len Lye Centre Trust head

tural benefits and underestimated costs."

Council chief executive Barbara McKerrow responded in a separate document.

"In it she explained that once the government funding agreement was signed, the council was locked into the specific building design, so meetings around that were pointless.

Prominent New Plymouth architect and arts lover Terry Boon also urged councillors not to go ahead with the centre in its present concept.

Mr Boon had designed the 1998 extension building and was heavily involved in strengthening the original Govett-Brewster building.

He said he supported Mr Maynard's comments, and he raised doubts about the cost and scope of the \$1m earthquake work costs

that the council said the building needed.

"I find it hard to believe that someone hasn't done a drive-past and said 'Oh, it's a pre-1935 building and therefore it's suspect'. As far as I'm concerned it's [effectively] a 1970s building. I would love to see it peer-reviewed and another opinion got."

That was rejected by the council's general manager of assets, Jim Willson.

"Mr Boon is not a structural engineer," he said. "We have had two independent engineering firms do two seismic evaluations on our buildings."

"I assure you the last thing we want to do is over-engineer anything. There is a lot of money involved." He said the gallery building, along with the TSB Showplace, complied with less than 20 per cent of the required standards put in place since the Christchurch earthquake.

As expected, the officers' recommendation and report came down firmly on the side of completing the centre.

It also placed a formidable obstacle in the way of councillors who wanted to halt the project before it started.

"The cost to council of not proceeding is estimated to be \$2.45m. This is because we would be required to pay at least \$1.45m [already expended with the approval of council] back to the Government," it said.

That would ultimately need to come from rates [a 2 per cent rise if done in one year] and provide an additional \$1m [estimated] to earthquake-strengthen the Govett-Brewster Art gallery as a stand-alone project.

A presentation of Len Lye's works stole the show at Thursday's meeting.

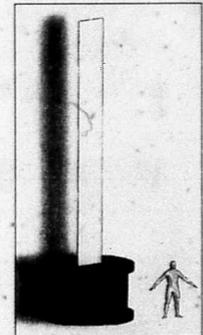
Len Lye Foundation chairman John Matthews came armed with a show of Len Lye works which will be seen in New Plymouth.

Among the most striking work will be a set of five serpents, each 50 metres long and a metre wide. The serpents will sit on a large black plinth in a lake and one rises to fire a bolt of lightning.

Other works could include a set of 84 wands that dance and involve swiss cow bells which work as a chiming clock the size of a football field.

"It's a pretty extraordinary piece. A pretty crazy piece."

Another is a giant blade, which is a post-graduate mechanical engineering project under construction at Canterbury University.



Cutting edge: How the giant blade will look.