

Residents rally to revamp town

BENNEYDALE is heading for a major makeover.

Residents are planning to reinvent the town as the 'Gateway to Pureora' much in the same way as Tirau became the 'Gateway to the Bay of Plenty' in the 1980s.

It's not the first time residents have come up with an innovative idea for putting their town on the map.

Benneydale made national headlines when it branded itself 'Rugby-dale' for the Rugby World Cup. (*Waitomo News*, September 15, 2011)

The town had passing tourists reaching for their cameras to capture pictures of giant wooden cutouts in the main street of players from every country.

The display even featured on national television.

"Things are again happening in our town," says Benneydale & District Resident & Ratepayer Association chairman Carl Epp.

"The Government has made The Timber Trail a big priority and, with other tourism developments taking off down here, we need to move forward to take advantage of the opportunities on offer.

"We have a beautification scheme going on with a Beautiful Benneydale group.

"Housing is also a priority and we've got people specifically looking after that."

PROBLEM HOUSING

Last year the town hit the headlines for a very different reason - sub-standard housing.

Concerns were first raised in 2009 by a public health nurse, then again by another last year.

A local meeting was called by Te Kuiti Hospital manager Thia Priestly to discuss the issue and a focus group formed to investigate health-related issues, in particular child health.

A subsequent *Waitomo News* story on October 2 highlighted the sub-standard living conditions - particularly of some Samoan families renting homes in Benneydale.

As a result of the focus group's report Hamilton-based K'Aute Pacifica which co-ordinates community and health services for seven Pacific Island ethnic groups, has held regular clinics in the town.

Public health nurses, district nurses, Plunket and other health-related services staff have also visited.

The focus group has also reported to the Waikato DHB's Waitomo/Otorohanga

Community Health Forum, which has agreed to keep Benneydale on its agenda.

Mrs Priestly says: "While the DHB cannot make decisions on the quality of houses at Benneydale, including heating and insulation, because that is not our business I will call another focus group meeting to determine how we can further benefit that community health-wise."

PRIORITY

Although awareness of poor housing issues started with the Samoan community, many of those families have since moved to Te Kuiti.

Benneydale residents have realised the issues of poor housing, economic pressures and quality of life extends to the wider community.

A year down the track, general housing conditions have been made a priority by the ratepayers group.

A sub-committee is devising an all-encompassing plan covering houses needing to be done up and is helping residents co-ordinate efforts to fast track requests for improvement such as insulation and eco-friendly heating.



STREETS AHEAD: Benneydale & District Resident & Ratepayer Association chairman Carl Epp says with tourism developments like The Timber Trail and Pa Harakeke, a major makeover of Benneydale is planned to reinvent the town as the 'Gateway to Pureora'.

TO P2

The need to say no!

OTOROHANGA residents want synthetic cannabis out of their town.

Although police say no local businesses are selling the drug, residents are adamant it's affecting their town's young people.

Police say it's now time for the community to get behind them to rid the community of synthetic cannabis.

Following a new initiative called 'Cuppa with a Coppa' where Constable Ben Parsonage shared morning tea with local residents, an alarming trend quickly developed.

Of the 12 people that visited him at Otorohanga Support House on July 18, almost all were

concerned about synthetic cannabis use in their town.

Most were worried about youths using products such as Kronik, K2 and Tai High, which they said was sparking depression and disorder in the community. **STORY P3**

In response, Mr Parsonage visited local businesses to find any 'dealers'.

He found none in town that admitted to selling or advertising the products, and is sure most young people are either getting illegal highs via "intermediaries" or online.

TO P5



CRACKDOWN: Otorohanga Police Constable Ian Runciman and other officers are working to rid the North King Country of all synthetic cannabis products.

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RECOVERY ROAD: Benneydale & District Resident & Ratepayer Association chairman Carl Epp says good things are beginning to happen in the town.

Residents rally to revamp town

FROM P1

The group is co-ordinating the paperwork and keeping records so everyone involved is on the same page.

And they are hoping it may be possible to get organisations like Habitat for Humanity on board.

"If people are living in healthy homes, the whole community benefits because everyone is happier," says Mr Epp.

"In the meantime we are also looking at making the town more attractive for people to move in to."

SUPPORT

A welcoming committee ensures new residents have the support they need when settling in and a group is cutting up and delivering firewood to many householders.

Mr Epp says the town is already showing other signs of improvement.

Areas of native trees have been planted and periodic detention workers have cleared blackberry and rubbish from reserves and gardens.

"The Waitomo District Council gardeners and mowers are also looking after us and doing a great job and the rugby club grounds are looking quite special," he says.

"New town signage is being designed, we are looking at starting a community garden on a vacant section, and a traffic speed meter has been installed to slow vehicles.

"All this may seem small potatoes to some, but it's important for us because it helps residents feel proud of their town."

Tourists are also providing good reason for the spruce-up.

"With hundreds of cyclists coming into the region to do The Timber Trail and more tourists visiting Pa Harakere and the old timber mills at Waimiha, it's important for our future that Benneydale is looking its best," he says.

"We're the gateway to the Pureora district with up to 700 cars going through here a day."

Mr Epp says some residents are running successful bed and breakfast businesses, and the hotel, which changed hands this

year, is looking at accommodation, entertainment and service improvements. There is also talk of putting in an ablutions service for campervan users.

"There are lots of possibilities.

"Not just for today, but for our children's future.

"The growth of tourism in the area will bring employment opportunities for our youth.

"As the Government says, there is more job growth in the rural sector than in the cities.

"Look at what happened to Tirau in the 1980s after the meat and fertiliser works closed.

"Many said Tirau would die, but the community got together and came up with alternatives and that town is buzzing.

"And that's what we're trying to do in Benneydale today."

Mr Epp says a three to five year plan is being put together with several projects in the pipeline.

"We need to help ourselves.

"Sometimes you need to be at the bottom before you can pull yourself back up."

Will the wider community help?

TE KUITI Rotary member Bruce Spurdle says he believes some of Benneydale's houses could be spruced up at little or no cost to the owners.

"Many of the owner/occupier residents are on low incomes and landlords who are only getting \$130 a week and spending \$5000 a year in rates have few resources to improve their homes," he says.

"I suggest unemployed people who can swing a hammer or paintbrush be encouraged to help.

"If there had been an earthquake in Benneydale people around the district would have been down there like a shot lending a hand.

"So why not extend that helping hand without an earthquake?"

"We would need one or two tradespeople to supervise and then we would need to find paint and timber from suppliers to do the job.

"If there had been an earthquake in Benneydale, people around the district would have been down there like a shot lending a hand. So why not extend that helping hand without an earthquake?"

"Maybe someone could sponsor a bus to pick up volunteers and take them to Benneydale."

Mr Spurdle says most of the houses aren't too bad, just needing a few weatherboards replaced and a lick of paint.

Other priorities would be insulation and carpets to keep people

warm and comfortable and better heating could be a priority further down the track.

"But if the town looked more attractive, more people would be keen to live there.

"I think it's looking quite positive and anyone who might like to get involved is welcome to contact me."