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# WAITOMO News

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MOTHER of two Tracey Jones has lived at the Te Kuiti Camping Ground since February 2016 and has no accommodation after the facility closes.

## Leasee's tenants can't find homes

By **Yvette Batten**

WHEN the Te Kuiti Camping Ground closes on August 31, 19 permanent residents will be without accommodation. And it comes at a time when there is a shortage of local social housing.

Ninety-three of Housing New Zealand's 94 properties in the Waitomo district are tenanted. The one vacant property will soon be occupied.

In June, the Waitomo District Council, which owns the Hinerangi St camp ground and leases its management to Tokowha (John) Te Huia, announced it was closing the grounds next month as it is not up to a suitable standard for tourists. (*Waitomo News*, June 29)

"Council is of course, sympathetic to the position Mr Te Huia's tenants find themselves in," says community services group manager Helen Beever.

"We are aware that the camp ground business owner has entered into arrangements with people who are currently living at the site as his tenants.

"Although council notes providing social housing is a central government responsibility, we do our best to advocate for appropriate accommodation options for the district."

### SOLUTIONS SOUGHT

Mrs Beever's comments are echoed by mayor Brian Hanna, who says he's meeting with both Housing New Zealand and the Maniapoto Maori Trust Board this week to try and find solutions.

"Social housing is an issue that is not really under our [council] responsibility," he says.

"All I can say is I'm meeting with other agencies to try and come up with some solutions. [to page 3](#)



THE Mangapohue Natural Bridge is one local attraction which could benefit from a tourist tax. FILE PIC

## Hanna leads LGNZ tourist tax talks

WAITOMO mayor Brian Hanna has spoken out on a national stage about a potential tourist tax to be charged at New Zealand borders.

Mr Hanna is the rural sector representative – on behalf of 26 rural authorities – on the Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) National Council.

While in Auckland at the LGNZ's annual conference this week, he appeared on *Newshub's The AM Show* on Tuesday in favour of the tax. The interview was prompted by a *Newshub* poll which found the majority of voters supported a \$50 tourism tax.

In speaking with the *Waitomo News*, Mr Hanna says a tourist tax is something that's been on LGNZ's agenda for a while, but says the current government is not in favour of the tax, fearing it will turn people off choosing New Zealand as a destination.

"It's the principal that those that use the facilities should help fund them. At the moment people that come in are not actually paying for the infrastructure."

Mr Hanna believes a \$20-\$30 tax would suffice.

"People aren't going to be put off by that. Surely it's better to give them a great experience and, when they want to use a toilet, there's one there to be used."

He wants rural councils to have the money to be able to partner with the Department of Conservation for projects.

And says there are some "pressure points" in the Waitomo region.

These include the Mangaokewa Reserve, Mangapohue Natural Bridge and Marokopa Falls where there are an inadequate amount or no toilets at all.

He says the cost of building and maintaining infrastructure falls on ratepayers, which isn't fair in rural areas when there aren't many residents. And cites the example of the Waitomo Caves, where there are about 200 residents, but more than 550,000 people visit the attraction each year. About 700,000, in total, visit the wider area.

Mr Hanna says tourism industry predictions are that visitor numbers will rise significantly in the coming years.

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# Leasee's tenants can't find homes

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"But the reality is we've made an announcement, and we're working towards that [closure] date."

Mrs Beever says Mr Te Huia was informed at a meeting in February that the council intended to terminate his lease and closing the camp ground was imminent.

"The purpose of the meeting was to ensure that the business owner gave plenty of time to his tenants to find alternative accommodation."

"A follow-up meeting was held in June, with termination of the lease discussed and confirmed for August 31."

Mr Te Huia has operated the camp ground since 1997. His long-term lease expired in 2012, and since then has been renewed on a month-by-month basis, as it could have been terminated at any time.

## TEMPORARY LIVING

Mrs Beever says the lease is clear that the camp ground is a "temporary living space", which means occupants shouldn't stay longer than 50 days continuously.

However, over the years it has become a place of refuge for people seeking affordable or emergency accommodation.

Mr Te Huia confirms he met with the council in February when they indicated the closure, but says he was led to understand it was a few years off.

"I had told the residents that they were talking about closing it, but everyone's got their name on a list waiting for a house or accommodation and there's none coming forward."

He says he's doing what he can to help those living at the camp ground, including putting his own money on the table as a deposit for social housing.

But his plan is reliant on financial input from the community.

"I've had no feedback from anyone."

Mr Te Huia says he's approached the council with a few ideas on solutions, but has not had a response he's satisfied with.

He believes there should be a public meeting so ratepayers can have their say.

## CAMP'S TENANTS

The *Waitomo News* visited the camp ground on Tuesday and spoke with tenants many of whom are on Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) benefits.



JACK Wirepa (left) and Desmond O'Keefe, who are both residents at Te Kuiti Camping Ground, in the communal cooking area.

None have found suitable accommodation, including Tracey Jones who has lived in a caravan on-site with her two sons since February 2016.

Miss Jones, who is on a WINZ unemployment benefit with an accommodation allowance, moved from Gisborne for a fresh start.

"I went to a real estate company here and as soon as I walked through the door they said there was no houses."

She's recently investigated finding a house through WINZ.

"They said they can get me a house but then, even then, they've got nothing here so I didn't see the point of filling out forms."

Jack Wirepa, a WINZ sickness beneficiary, has lived in a cabin at the camp ground for 10 months.

"Work brought me to Te Kuiti, but only the camp ground had accommodation available at the time," he says.

"If it was up to me do you think I'd be living in that little square box?"

He says he's made efforts to find other accommodation but it's either too expensive or he's missed out.

## LIVE AT STATUE

"Come the first of September and we're all turfed out of here I'll be getting a tarp and going straight down to Colin Meads [statue] and hoiking it over his leg."

"He'll be able to hold my tarp up. I even went there yesterday to have a look at his foot."

"I can hang my billy over his foot and put my little gas burner [underneath] to heat my cup of tea."

He believes it's "morally wrong" that the residents, particularly mothers with children, will lose their homes with nowhere else to go.

"Everyone's trying to keep upbeat about it but no-one's got any solid offers of accommodation."

## MINISTRY COMMISSIONER

Ministry of Social Development (MSD) Taranaki regional social development commissioner Gloria Campbell says they're contacting clients living at the camp ground to discuss what support can be given.

"After being made aware of this situation our staff ceased granting assistance for anyone who presented to us wanting to stay at this facility [camp ground]."

Mrs Campbell says when people need emergency accommodation assistance, MSD works

with them to look at accommodation options in the area.

This could include staying with friends or family, motels and holiday parks.

Clients with accommodation needs are assessed for their eligibility for the Social Housing Register.

If eligible, they're assessed and given a priority rating on the register, before being matched with social housing when it becomes available.

She urges people who have a housing need to call Work and Income on 0800 559 009 or visit their local service centre.

## LAND CLAIM

Meanwhile, Te Hapu o te Wakaminenga Wahi o Maniapoto o Nu Tirenī has laid claim to the camp ground land.

On Tuesday, the tribal group issued the Waitomo District Council with a notice stating they do not consent to its actions to "evict" members of its hapu. It also threatened a fee of up to \$1 billion per incident for any breaches of the notice's stipulations.

When asked about the claim, Mrs Beever says it is "factually incorrect".

"The council is not evicting the people who live there because there is no tenancy arrangement between the two parties."

She says the legal right to occupy the land is currently held by Mr Te Huia.

"The caravans and other accommodation on the property belong to Mr Te Huia. The WDC does not own any accommodation or other structures used as accommodation on the property."

The camp ground has eight cabins, six caravans and 14 tent sites.

WDC owns the ablution and kitchen facilities.



TOKOWHA (John) Te Huia, who has managed the Te Kuiti Camping Ground for 20 years, wants a public meeting so ratepayers can have their say about its closure.



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