

IN FOCUS — COMMUNITY FEATURE

Time to put personalities aside

THE Bluff Community Board (BCB) has been plagued with controversy in recent years with in-fighting, name-calling and public bust ups. How effectively can the BCB undertake its role while being dogged with so much conflict? And, more pointedly, does Bluff really need a community board at all? Reporter **PETRINA WRIGHT** investigates in the final part of a three-part series.

IT would be a “very, very sad day” if Bluff lost its community board, chairwoman Jan Mitchell says.

The board had accomplished many positive things for the community in recent years, such as the Bluff Concept Plan which resulted in “Bluff Spirit” — a multi-million dollar project to upgrade the main street business area, the camping ground and Stirling Point, she said.

The board had also brought the community together to save the local pool from closure, successfully opposed the Bluff Oyster Festival being moved into the city, and was instrumental in introducing a green waste service and the development of a new skate park, she said.

In 2009, the BCB won the Facilitation Award for restoring the town’s bus service between Invercargill and Bluff, and won the Significant Project award for helping to save the swimming pool from closure in 2011 at the New Zealand Community Boards’



In session: Jan Mitchell (centre) chairs the first Bluff Community Board meeting of 2013.

Conference Best Practice Awards.

“We are there to advocate for the people and decide what is best for the town,” Mrs Mitchell said.

“You do need people on the spot to deal with things as they arise. Problems don’t happen between 9 and 5.”

Outspoken BCB member Brent Proctor has a different take on the board.

The problems within the board had “definitely” affected its ability to do its

job effectively, he said.

“It’s probably crippled itself.”

The Bluff township would fare well if the board was disbanded, he said.

“We are so ineffective as we are... It could be run just as efficiently from Invercargill.”

Former Otatara Community Board member Geoff Piercy said the community board did a good job in Bluff, “but personalities have probably got in the way a bit”.

The BCB had become more of a lobbying group, but council would never force the issue of whether the board was relevant or not, he said.

“As soon as we did, they would rise up in arms and see us as the oppressor. We prefer to take a passive approach and let them work it out for themselves what is best,” he said.

“They are quite fierce. Why buy into a fight?”

The test might come during October’s local body elections.

At the last BCB elections, five candidates stood for five positions and were elected whether they were right for the job or not. If voting numbers continued to fall and fewer candidates stood for the board, it would raise questions of its relevance, Mr Shadbolt said.

One face which will be missing after October will be Mrs Mitchell’s. She announced in December that after 14 years on the board she would not stand for re-election.

The ICC also has the power to reassess the existence of community boards at a six-yearly representation review. The next review will be in about three years time.

The *Southland Express* attended a BCB meeting on Monday night. As chair, Mrs Mitchell ensured the meeting ran strictly to protocols avoiding any dispute or upset on the night.

“I am certainly not recommending it, but in theory it [not having a community board] could work out.”

Invercargill Mayor Tim Shadbolt said whether the BCB was effective was debatable, but its existence was not doing any harm.

He suggested it might be better for Bluff to have independent swimming pool, maritime and oyster festival trusts rather than an extra layer of community board.