

Historic trader levy vote: it's not easy to say no



Warrnambool traders will have their say from next week on the controversial Commerce Warrnambool levy that will be partly used to fund promotions such as these.

OPINION

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] A [dropcap]fter months of often acrimonious debate, Warrnambool traders will have an historic vote from next week on whether they want to pay a special levy for a chamber of commerce – and those against the move will have to work a lot harder than those in favour.

It is the first time the **Warrnambool City Council** has used its power to introduce special rates and levies on [behalf of a](#)

specific group – Commerce Warrnambool – and at this scale; 1337 traders will be affected.

The proposed levy will cost each trader up to \$300 a year for the next five years and give Commerce Warrnambool an annual budget of at least \$300,000 to spend on marketing the city, advocating for business and setting up networking opportunities and professional workshops.

Under the strange rules of the Victorian Local Government Act, those traders who don't want to pay the levy will have to jump through hoops to make sure their vote is counted, whereas those who support the levy won't have to do anything.

Here are the steps:

First, traders who object have to make sure they receive the notice that is coming in the mail from the council.

Second, they have to tick the "no" box.

Third, they have to attach evidence that they are responsible for paying the rates on their business premises, either by attaching a copy of their lease, a letter from the property owner, or a stat dec.

Fourth, they have to mail the letter back (postage paid).

And they have to do it all by November 3.



Warrnambool's CBD, like those in other regional cities, is in a state of transition as old businesses close and new ones open. But is a new levy the answer to helping businesses thrive?

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] I
[/dropcap]t's a time consuming list of things to do while also running a business, a family and a life, but this is what dissenting traders will have to do if they wish to be heard.

Not only that, but almost 670 traders will have to make the effort if the "no" vote is to succeed, whereas the remaining 670 voters who might support the levy can sit tight.

It is a cockeyed system and reflects the history of this part of the Local Government Act, which was introduced in 1989 so that local councils could raise "special rates and charges" for all manner of things from footpaths and drainage works, to shopping centre promotions.

It seems when there is more ratepayer money to be made, the

harder it is to object, the better!

Not surprisingly, given how the voting system works, the “no” campaign – aka [The Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) – has been hitting both the pavement and social media for months to argue why the levy should not go ahead and how to vote against it. “No” posters have appeared in shopfronts across town, and its Facebook page has accumulated 477 followers.

By contrast, the “yes” campaign – aka Commerce Warrnambool – has been almost eerily quiet up until the last week, when it began to place ads in the local paper advocating for the levy.

There has been no doorknocking or poster pasting, but [its Facebook page](#) did reveal earlier this week that it intended to do an information mailout via the council, until the council said it could not be involved (for obvious reasons). The mailout will now come via Australia Post.



BIBA Hairdressing, in Timor St, is one of the success stories happening in the CBD. Image courtesy [Sinead Murphy](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T
[/dropcap]he difficulty for Commerce Warrnambool in trying to pitch the levy is twofold: first, it is trying to boost its membership by force.

In 2011, a year after Commerce Warrnambool began, it had only 80 members and an annual budget of \$24,000. The levy is partly a backdoor way of making traders support an old-fashioned, traditionally male-dominated concept that perhaps has had its day.

Surely if so many traders were keen to support a chamber of commerce, they would just sign up? Meanwhile, new business networks are gathering strength, like the [Young Professionals Warrnambool](#) and [Business and Professional Women South-West](#).

Second, despite the best of intentions, the ideas put forward by Commerce Warrnambool have failed to inspire those struggling under the weight of high rents, online shopping and a tired-looking CBD.

Christmas promotions, car raffles and shop-local campaigns are not new. Indeed a council-backed [Christmas promotion, complete with Santa arriving by helicopter](#), ran in 2011 and yet shops are still closing down in the CBD.

Car raffles and the like are short-term, sugar-fixes when what is really needed is an acceptance that the Internet is the industrial revolution of our time and not all businesses will survive. Some will adapt, others will die and new businesses will emerge.

In my view, a new levy won't make an inch of difference compared to the revitalisation of Liebig St that is underway at last, and a lowering of CBD rents to realistic, regional-based levels (this is in the hands of property owners) to inspire new businesses and support those in transition.

How many traders share this view remains to be seen when the

votes finally come in – or not.

[box]Note: If less than 50 per cent of businesses object to the new levy, the council will make the final decision on whether it goes ahead at its December 1 meeting. Anyone can make a submission for or against the levy and can do so in writing by Nov 3 to the CEO, Warrnambool City Council, 25 Liebig St, Warrnambool, 3280. All submissions are public documents.[/box]

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All words, no funding, for the Fletcher Jones story



Just like old times: the Fletcher Jones gardens came to life at the recent spring picnic, under the watchful

eye of the silver ball. The next challenge is to preserve the Fletcher Jones stories.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

If there was any doubt as to how much the Fletcher Jones Pleasant Hill site in Warrnambool means to locals, the recent spring picnic has laid it to rest.

Around 1500 people flocked to the gardens last weekend to wander among the market stalls, listen to the music, stretch out on the grass and – like so many thousands of children and adults before them – take pleasure in the many garden delights that Sir Fletcher Jones created in his factory grounds.

Cr Jacinta Ermacora has leapt on this huge wave of support [to announce today in the local newspaper](#) that she thought it was “time to tell the Fletcher Jones story”, and a meeting would be held shortly between all of the interested parties to work out how this could be done.

What Cr Ermacora failed to mention, or was not reported, was that the council was first asked to collect these stories way back in 2002, when it was a key recommendation in a report it [commissioned](#) into the future of the Fletcher Jones site.

What has been done by anyone on the council since then?

Absolutely nothing.



Thousands of stories make up the fabric of the Fletcher Jones story, which is still yet to be documented from a social history perspective. Image: Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens Facebook page.

There is also a vast amount of precious Fletcher Jones memorabilia cast about Warrnambool, with some in History House, some at The Artery, and some in people's private homes, that needs to be collated, assessed and preserved for future installations.

What has any council member done about that so far?

Absolutely nothing.

In the interim, as people age, and pass away, the stories are being lost and the memorabilia is getting harder to trace (and let's not forget that many items ended up in a skip bin when the site was first sold by the council in 2005, only to be retrieved by artists).

This is why a small group of people, led by **Julie Eagles** from

the Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group, has been asking the council for *months* whether there is any funding set aside in this year's budget to at least start the process of gathering these stories.

It was hard to get a clear reply.

Bluestone got a reply on Thursday and this is it in full:

"We have no funding specifically allocated to telling the story of Fletcher Jones in this year's budget.

However, the history of Fletcher Jones and other elements that tell the story of Warrnambool will be on the table when the time comes to look at public art as part of the city centre renewal.

Once we have the foundation stage of the renewal plan completed – which addresses issues including accessibility and mobility – we'll be engaging the community in a discussion on public art." – Nick Higgins, Manager Communications.

So how much funding is there for the Fletcher Jones story project?

Absolutely nothing.



The stories behind
working for Fletcher

Jones are yet to be captured.

By contrast, Melbourne University has already started work on collating and recording the business story behind Fletcher Jones and **Melinda Barrie**, [from this project](#), has shown a willingness to work with local groups to capture the local stories.

It is embarrassing, to say the least, that a Melbourne institution has been more motivated and excited by our local, contemporary history than our own council.

And by contrast to the council's inertia on what we might call the whole Fletcher Jones package – the stories, the site, the potential – last Sunday's picnic was a triumph of what can be done through hard work, passion and belief.

Not only did it showcase the magnificent efforts of resident gardener **Lex Caldwell** and his team of volunteers who have kept the gardens alive, but it was a celebration for all those other volunteers who believed that the best parts of this iconic site were worth saving.

Those who pressed hardest to keep Pleasant Hill on the public radar – Julie Eagles, The F Project arts collective, us here at *Bluestone Magazine*, and the consequent [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens Facebook page](#) started by **Tonia Wilcox** – all did so without any official backing.



The annual Christmas party picnic was a highlight of the Fletcher Jones calendar. Plans are afoot to bring them back again, albeit in a revised version. Image: Courtesy of Lost Warrnambool.

Similarly, the spring picnic was organised within weeks by The F Project/The Artery without a cent of funding and relied heavily on volunteers who pulled it all together – people like Dr Emma Charlton, Megan Nicolson, Des and Helen Bunyon, Ruby Richardson, Danielle O'Brien, the Factory Arts crew, Julie Eagles – the same names that keep coming up time after time and who continue to make exciting things happen around the city.

They don't sit around waiting for others to do something: they just get on with it.

The F Project, for its efforts, made less than \$400 on the day from a raffle, but it was never about raising money. It was all about bringing life back to the gardens through the arts, but you can't keep expecting volunteers to do all the heavy lifting.

And so it is with the capturing of the Fletcher Jones stories.

The funding is there: it's just how the council chooses to spend it.

It recently found [\\$10,000 on short notice](#) for the Oddball movie, and [another \\$3 million](#) of state and council funds are about to be plunged into sound and light shows at Flagstaff Hill.

So unless Cr Ermacora can come to the meeting armed with a firm proposal for council funding, it is nothing more than hollow words on the back of very successful picnic and that – unlike a pair of Fletcher Jones' scissors on the factory floor – just won't cut it.

The beat goes round and round for Spinners



It's all about the vinyl: Toni Jenkins is among a group of Spinners in Warrnambool who meet four times a year to share their love of music...played on record players.

[dropcap style="color:#DC943C;"] I [/dropcap]t began as a good idea for a housewarming party that has taken on a life of its own as a regular rug-twisting, hip-swinging, good-time-guaranteed-get-together for a group of friends who love LPs.

If you know what the acronym LP stands for, then you are off to a good start to be a "Spinner": a person who loves listening to actual vinyl records rather than CDs, MP3s or digital downloads.

"It is the sound – the richness and quality of the sound – and when you hear it again after not having heard it for a long time, it is wonderful," explains the founder of the Spinners in Warrnambool, **Claire Jennings**.

Claire inadvertently started the Spinners when planning her housewarming party in 2011 – a year after she had moved in –

and decided that because she was a year late with the festivities, the party had better be something out of the ordinary. Why not set up a stereo and play some records?

“But I didn’t have a record player and I didn’t have any records – I had nothing,” Claire throws out her hands and laughs.



[dropcap style="color:#DC943C;"] T [/dropcap>he solution was to borrow a couple of turntables and ask the guests to bring along their favourite records to “spin a set” in a seamless transition between one turntable and the other, just as DJs used to do when Claire and her friends were in their teens.

“I organised for a bit of a practice-run a month before the actual party, just to see how it would work, and the few people I invited ended up dancing all night...I basically ended

up having two housewarming parties,” Claire says.

Like all memorable nights, the talk the next day was all around “we must do that again!”

So they did.

And then they did it again.

And now a core group of around 12 people meet four times a year, with other “Spinners” included by invitation-only, to play their 25-minute “sets”, enjoy some food and, if they feel like it (which they usually do), to dance.

“To hear *Smoke on the Water* again on vinyl after so many years, well, it’s just magical,” Claire says, adding that she loves rock and roll and is a mad Beatles fan.



The record-breaking cake stand that is used by the host of each Spinners’ night to serve the

snacks.

[dropcap style="color:#DC943C;"] S [/dropcap]pinner **Toni Jenkins** said the group reignited her passion for music – she has eclectic taste from The Cure, to Janis Joplin, Bette Midler and just about anything from the 80s – and that there is a particular joy that comes from hearing great songs.

“There are still songs out there that you have never heard before and, every now and then, someone will come up with an absolute gem,” she says.

Toni admits she has her favourite Spinners – **Roy Reekie, Paul Sheehan** – who can keep her on the dance floor for most of the night.

“To dance through a whole set of about 10 songs is not for the faint hearted,” she laughs.

A few rules have been added in recent times, such as playlists being written down rather than chosen at random, and each Spinner bringing their own glass and taking their shoes off at the door, just to save on dishes and floor damage.

In the end, however, it is still all about the music.

“The songs represent a particular time and a particular era – it is our history – and there is great joy in being completely immersed in that again,” Toni says.



Songs and artists from another era are brought back to vivid life through the Spinners nights in Warrnambool.

[box] **The Spinners are hosting a farewell and tribute night to Warrnambool's legendary Capricorn Records and owner Mick Fitzgerald (who is a Spinner) on Sept 20 at the Ozone Room, Warrnambool Hotel. Tickets are \$10 from Long Gone, 115 Fairy St, Warrnambool.** [/box]

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