

Trader levy deal...and the Jennifer Lowe factor



The controversial Warrnambool traders levy is set to be revised and relaunched in late September as a compromise.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [/dropcap]s the proposed Warrnambool traders levy rolls into another month without a resolution between the two sides, there is a burning question that remains unanswered: why is the council persisting with it?

Bluestone has been looking for clues.

As we know, [more than 100 angry traders](#) crammed into the **Warrnambool City Council** chambers for its last meeting and demanded that it quash moves to raise \$3 million over five years for **Commerce Warrnambool** via a compulsory levy on businesses.

Despite this show of dissatisfaction, Mayor Michael Neoh used his casting vote to give Commerce Warrnambool more time –

until the end of September – to try and negotiate a deal with traders.

What this means is that, behind the scenes, the push is on to split the levy between traders and the council and call it a “compromise”.

[As we wrote last month](#), instead of traders paying the full \$600,000 a year, they will be asked to pay less – say, \$450,000 – and the council will chip in the remaining \$150,000 because it has decided it really wants to help Commerce Warrnambool along.

The council’s enthusiasm is where we have our first clue about what we believe is really going on.

It is a rare day that the council finds a group that is willing to tax its own members to pay for things that the council should be doing, ie. supporting businesses and promoting the city.

If this \$3 million fund goes ahead, the council can justifiably shift the bulk of the cost (and responsibility) of marketing, promotions and supporting businesses on to Commerce Warrnambool and have the traders fund it.

Initially, the council thought it would not have to pay a cent (more about that in a moment), but even if it contributes \$150,000, all it needs to do is cut a couple of people from its marketing department and “voila!” it has broken even.



It's a rare day when a lobby group agrees to tax its own members to raise funds for work previously done by the council.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] F [/dropcap]or the council's beancounters, this is a sweet deal in the making, even if not quite as sweet as the traders being hit with the full \$600,000 a year, it is an excellent start.

Angry traders, of course, will be told that they can still vote "no" to stop the levy, but if the pressure on opposing traders is considerable now, I can only imagine what it will be like when they are seen to be objecting to a "compromise".

Given the levy idea has created such a toxic split in the business community, why didn't Commerce Warrnambool just ask the council for \$150,000 in the first place and start small? Well, it did.

Bluestone has learned that since Commerce Warrnambool began in 2010, it has approached the council many times to see if it would provide seed funding (something like \$80,000-\$100,000 a year for three years) until it found its feet and became

financially independent.

At that time, Commerce Warrnambool was primarily a business advocacy, network and support group, which is what chambers of commerce are all about, rather than focussing on the much larger role of promoting and marketing the whole city.

It was knocked back each time.

So what has changed?

We believe the clues lie in a series of events late last year.



Former outspoken
Warrnambool City Councillor
Jennifer Lowe, who was a
key player in Commerce
Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] B [/dropcap] that time,

Commerce Warrnambool had in its hands a proposal prepared by consultants **Peter McNabb and Associates** which, in the face of the council's persistent knock backs, detailed how a business levy could not only fund its activities, but widen them substantially.

The business levy would not be a seed fund for Commerce Warrnambool until it attracted memberships and corporate sponsorships, but virtually its *entire* fund. Its budget would no longer be around \$300,000 over three years, but \$3 million over five years.

Some (but not all) members of Commerce Warrnambool got very excited and *now* the council was also listening – for the cost-saving reasons mentioned earlier. But there was still a sticking point.

Commerce Warrnambool, at that time, was still operating under its original board of management including secretary **Jennifer Lowe**.

It's no secret to those who have watched the council for a long time that Ms Lowe, who is a former city councillor, was not universally embraced by fellow councillors and council staff during her term (that ended in 2012) because of her outspoken stand on many issues.

Imagine if Commerce Warrnambool learned that the council liked its big, bold levy idea to raise \$3 million from traders, but it didn't like Ms Lowe holding a key role in an organisation that was set to become much more influential. The money, or the secretary?

Whatever the scenario, Ms Lowe [suddenly stepped down](#) in late November, together with two other founding board members in **Darren Harris** and **Peter Watson**.

From there, the levy proposal was rolled out in something of a rush.

Within a few months, a new Commerce Warrnambool board of management was elected – with **Tony Herbert** replacing **Richard Montgomery** as president – a business plan went to council, the levy was ticked off at its May meeting, the public notices were being prepared...and then an increasing number of traders realised that they would have to pay for it and the wheels began to fall off.

As it stands, the traders are [holding off on their threatened legal action](#) pending more discussions which may or may not see Ms Lowe back at the negotiating table.

It is understood that, privately, she has made her feelings about the levy debacle well known to her Commerce Warrnambool colleagues, but is also among those keen to see the impasse resolved.

Whether somebody left outside the tent can now clean up the mess within it, remains to be seen.

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What about more fun for grown-ups?



The Fun4Kids festival in Warrnambool is gone for another year – and the grass re-growth begins ...

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [/dropcap]s Warrnambool restores the grass on the Civic Green after another whirlwind

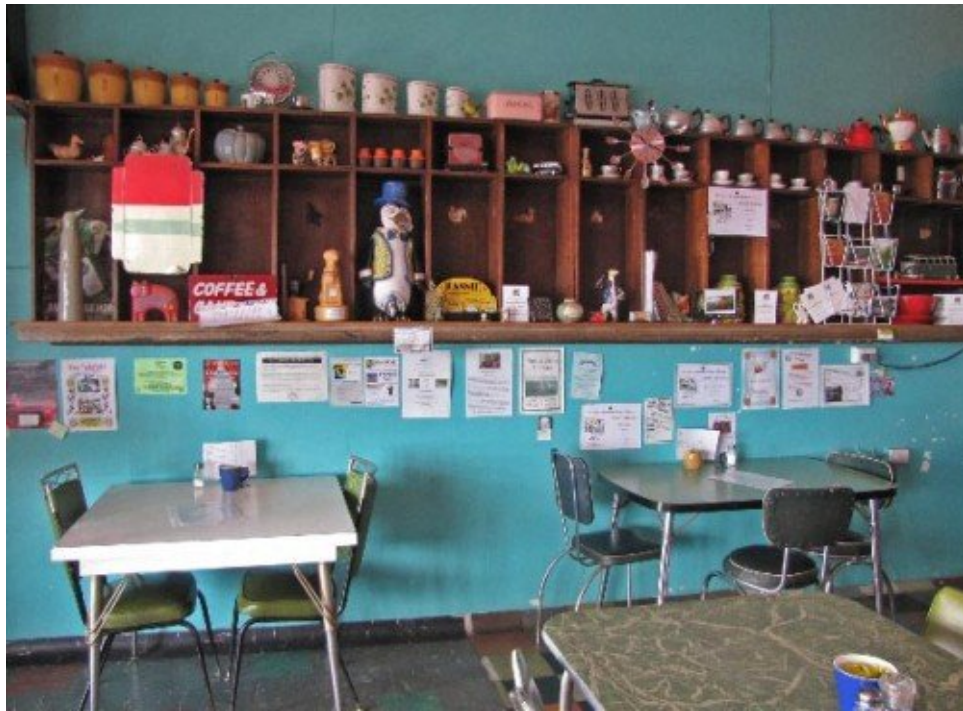
Fun4Kids festival, I can't help but wonder when we will turn our attention to more permanent attractions for grown-ups.

As one local put it, "Warrnambool is great for kids and great for the elderly, but there is not a lot for people in the middle" – and she is spot on.

Most regional cities in Victoria are coming up with new ways to attract the cashed-up, time-poor, middle-aged, middle class who want to spend their dollars on unique experiences and personal indulgence, but Warrnambool persists with "big things" that lose money.

Two of our attractions – Fun4Kids and Flagstaff Hill – cost the Warrnambool City Council around \$1 million a year to prop up. In a queer kind of logic, we continue to subsidise the cost of these attractions to ensure their survival, but still consider them successful and necessary.

It would be understandable if these attractions were just starting out and trying to find their feet, after all, every new concept needs time to establish itself. But Fun4Kids is in its 14th year – 14th! – and still doesn't break even despite the valiant efforts of all those involved and how much fun there is to be had.



Quirky shops and cafes – like this little cafe in the town of Penguin, Tasmania (popln 3924) – are what put a town (or city) on the tourist map.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [/dropcap] report commissioned by the council last year was upbeat in its assessment of Fun4Kids. It found the event created direct expenditure of around \$1.9 million and that this, in turn, stimulates even more economic activity which – based on a series of sums and guesstimates – brings the total benefit to an estimated \$3.69 million.

These figures, however, are always hard to quantify – where does this \$3.7 million, if it exists, actually go?

From the council report, it appears local accommodation is a big winner through filling more beds in winter, but other traders are less affected.

Of the 95 traders who responded to a council survey, 50 per cent said their turnover *remained about the same for this time of year* and only nine (10 per cent) said it was significantly

higher.

Some may consider \$450,000 a year a small price to pay for an injection of winter tourists, but if we add up the total cost over 14 years – around \$6 million – you start to wonder what we have to show for the money.

Perhaps the \$6 million would have been better spent helping to establish a series of experiences that run all year round?

You only have to look at any of the recent Victorian tourism reports to see where the future lies: eco-tourism, food, wine, art, culture, boutique/quirky shops and unique, luxury experiences. In other words, fun for grown ups who may, or may not, also want to take their kids along.



Tanya Connellan and Liz Foreman from the Merrijig Inn are part of a new artisan food trail that has started around the Port Fairy district.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] 0 [/dropcap]nce again, Port

Fairy is leading the way. It is hard to believe today, but 30 years ago Port Fairy was a very cheap place to live because it was considered a dumpy backwater.

Since then, it has reinvented itself spectacularly by tapping into its natural assets – its seaside location, history, charming buildings (see our story this week on [Coffin Sally's bar](#)) and its access to the rich, fertile soils that support a boutique food and wine industry.

The same week as Fun4Kids started, for example, Port Fairy used its [Winter Warmer Weekends](#) to launch an artisan food trail.

Shane Clancey, from Basalt Wines, Killarney, has teamed up with the [Merrijig Inn](#), Port Fairy, and [Shaw River Buffalo Cheese](#), at Yambuk – among others – to showcase the fantastic food and wine that is produced in the area.

I can see Melbourne folk salivating already at the thought of driving down the Great Ocean Road, taking in the 12 Apostles, winding their way through the [12 Apostles Gourmet Food Trail](#) that incorporates the [Timboon Distillery](#), [Newton's Ridge](#), Apostle Whey Cheeses and others, then zooming on to Port Fairy to do more of the same, before retiring for the night in a gorgeous 1800's cottage with a crackling fire.

Why would they bother to linger in Warrnambool?



Warrnambool has an ecological, environmental and cultural gem on its doorstep with Tower Hill, but does little to capitalise on its potential. Image: [Travel Victoria](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap] have [written before](#) about how frustrating it is that Warrnambool does not make more of its natural advantages. We have one of the most spectacular and accessible coastlines in south-west Victoria, but is there even one classy restaurant with sea views?

We have Tower Hill on our doorstep, which [has already been identified](#) as a potential tourism mecca, but what are we doing to help capitalise on its appeal to bushwalkers, birdwatchers and international visitors who appreciate our indigenous heritage far more than we do?

We have a city centre full of historic intact buildings – those that have not burnt down or been demolished – but what are we doing to assist those people trying to convert them into cafes, galleries, cosy wine bars, jazz clubs and boutique shops?

We have an incredible whale nursery, but is there a fun, interactive place for visitors to go and hear a whale sing, or

to touch its 'skin', or learn about how and why they come to Warrnambool each year?

And we have an art gallery that was one of the best in regional Victoria when it opened in 1986, but has not seen any meaningful funds spent on it since – there isn't even a cafe – and it now relies increasingly on corporate events and weddings for income.

Imagine, just for a moment, if we didn't spend \$450,000 a year on subsidising 8 days of Fun4Kids, but instead divided this money to help kickstart great ideas – food trails, artisan studios, laneway cafes, cosy bars, boutique shops, a bush tucker cafe at Tower Hill and the like.

Perhaps then Warrnambool would have some enduring funk – as well as fun – for people of all ages.



The [Whale Museum](http://the-whale-museum.com) in Friday Harbor, Washington State, is devoted to orcas and shows that a museum does not have to be big, to be interesting.

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Reekie to challenge Napthine for South West Coast



Warrnambool lawyer Roy Reekie will line up against Denis Naphine for a third time at the next state election.

COMMENT

[dropcap style="color: #8f9f59;"] A [dropcap]fter months of speculation, Warrnambool lawyer **Roy Reekie** is poised to announce his preselection as the Labor challenger to Premier **Denis Naphine** for the seat of South West Coast.

Well-placed sources said Mr Reekie's pre-selection had been recently finalised by the Labor Party and an official announcement would be made shortly.

Ever since returning to live in Warrnambool last year, Mr Reekie has been one of the most promising prospects for Labor because of an already-established profile on the back of the

2002 state election. In that year, Mr Reekie came within a tantalising few hundred votes of pulling off the greatest upset that the south-west has ever seen.

Then, as now, his competitor was Dr Napthine, as it was again in 2006.

The election on November 29 will see the third showdown between the pair, but this time Mr Reekie faces an enormous task, despite the polls indicating that the Coalition will lose office.

While far from the safest Liberal seat in Victoria (that honor goes to leafy Malvern on a 20.5% swing) South West Coast requires an almost 12% swing for the seat to change hands and that is highly unlikely to happen.

What will happen, however, is a concerted push by Labor to carve into that bloated margin and, at the very least, drag it back into single digits so that the 2018 state election becomes a real contest.

And this can only be good for everybody, whether you vote Labor, Liberal, Greens, Nationals or for the Palmer United Party.

Marginal seats are seats where things happen and things get done.

As I [wrote last August in the lead-up to the federal election](#), why would anybody wish to keep voting in the same party, year after year?

Such predictability makes politicians go soft in the mouth. They know they don't have to work too hard to actually deliver, because, heck, we just keep voting them back in anyway.

Judging by his extraordinary number of media appearances of late, there is no doubt Dr Napthine works very hard at his

job, but the South West Coast is suffering.

Our major roads are terrible, our education standards are embarrassing, our tourism appeal is patchy (especially compared to what is happening at the *other* end of the Great Ocean Road), and our V-Line train service is one of the worst performing in the state.

We deserve better.

Mr Reekie, together with the Greens candidate **Thomas Campbell** and all of the other candidates yet to emerge, has his work cut out for him, but let's at least hope for a robust race.

We deserve that too.

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From artist to children's author: Fiona Clarke



“When I was growing up, the only children’s books were fairytales or stories about a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”. Portrait of Fiona Clarke by Warrnambool photographer [John \(Jack Wilkins\)](#).

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W[/dropcap]hen **Fiona Clarke** was a little girl growing up in the 60s, most picture books were either British, based on fairytales, or about “a big ship and a fella called Captain Cook”.

“And Dr Seuss – he was good, I liked him,” Fiona says, laughing.

There were certainly very few children's books that told stories from Aboriginal culture and none that reflected Fiona's heritage as part of the Kirrae Whurrong clan in South-West Victoria.

In the second half of her life, Fiona has found herself at the forefront of changing all that, having published her first children's book in late 2012 and starting work on a second.



**DONAT
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As an established visual artist, Fiona, who lives in Merrivale, is best known for her paintings, sculptures and tapestries, but she is now bringing her storytelling and fine artistic ability together through books.

"It was something that I always wanted to do, but I didn't know where to start, like how to find a publisher when they all say 'no'," she says.



Fiona in her studio (aka the kitchen table) with copies of her first book, *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, and the blank canvas for her second book that is based around the rainbow serpent.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] E [/dropcap]arly-childhood educator **Claire Jennings** became the bridge between Fiona's talent and the publishing world and persuaded her to write and illustrate *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow*, published by One Day Hill (which has also published work by **Derek Guille**, **Shane Howard** and **Archie Roach**).

Minkgill is the Kirrae Whurrong word for "star" which she discovered after Shane Howard and her late brother, Ian, individually insisted that she read the classic book about Aboriginal culture in South-West Victoria by James Dawson, first published in 1881.

Shortly after the book was published, Fiona embarked on a series of storytelling workshops around Warrnambool and Melbourne, where she was met with a rapturous response by her young audience.

At the end of one storytelling session, a little girl approached Fiona and, with her hands across her heart, declared it was “the best story I’ve heard in my whole life!”



The artist becomes the subject: a portrait of Fiona by the late Brian Dunlop (1938-2009), *Sundown, Sunrise*, 1993. Image: [Culture Victoria](#) and the [Warrnambool Art Gallery](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T his time, the inspiration for Fiona’s second book has come from her great-niece, **Meekah Merriman**, who is just starting to read. Fiona tells a story about how Meekah walked up to her mother, lifted her shirt to show her rainbow-coloured *Dora the Explorer* belt, and said “the rainbow serpent is coming”.

That simple sentence settled in Fiona’s mind and she began to pen a story around the title.

“*The Rainbow Serpent is Coming* has come out as an environmental story, about the land and how we are treating

the land,” she says.

With the writing almost finished, Fiona is turning her mind to the illustrations that need to be painted for each page. A blank canvas – literally – is spread out on her kitchen table, which she uses as a studio.

It is a space she shares with her teenage daughter, **Patricia**, who is a keen artist, and her husband **Ken McKean**, whom she first met as a five or six year old after talking about the “walking fish” in his parent’s pet shop; they have been married more than 30 years.



Fiona’s father, the late Banjo (Henry) Clarke as a young man. He continues to inspire Fiona’s creative work, including her

decision to write books for
children.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] F [/dropcap]iona's birth family also continues to have a pervasive influence on her work.

As the youngest of six children born to the late Audrey and "Banjo" (Henry) Clarke, a respected elder of the Kirrae Whurrong, Fiona grew up surrounded by the energy and chatter of a large family.

"My father loved children," she says.

"He always loved to hear the sound of the children's laughter and said how much he missed hearing that when they were gone, grown up and moved away."

Fiona tells how Banjo often described children's laughter as "bringing colour to the world".

"They bring brightness to the world and Dad always talked about that, right up until the day he died, actually.

"This is why the pictures in my books are always bright – not too much earthy brown stuff," she laughs.

[box] **Fiona recently completed a mural, with Bronwyn Ferguson, at the entrance to Warrnambool College. You can find out more about Fiona's artwork on her website [here](#) and see her talk [about her work here](#). *Minkgill Chases the Rainbow* is available through Warrnambool Books.** [/box]

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Funky bar brings life back to dead alley



The genius behind Coffin Sally's pizza and bar in Port Fairy is the combined talents of Trent

Eggington and Peter Charlton.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t was fog-breath freezing and pouring with rain when *Bluestone* first discovered **Coffin Sally's** bar which, theoretically, should have been as dead as a doornail, given the weather.

Instead this little slice of Fitzroy in Port Fairy was packed with people warming themselves by a roaring fire in an old bluestone fireplace that was built for just such nights, while owners **Peter Charlton** and **Trent Eggington** and their fleet-footed staff kept the wine flowing and the pizza coming.

It was like stepping into a party to which everyone was invited and everyone was relaxed, not least of all Peter and Trent who, in their own words, are living the dream.

The pair became friends about seven years ago after working together in pizza shops in Lorne, and – like most of us who work for others – dreamt of some day owning their own business that, in their case, would centre around a gourmet pizza bar.

Peter, who grew up in NSW, is a chef and Trent, from Melbourne, has three years' training as an architect which has given him a keen eye for what works with interior design. Aside from an appreciation for good food and aesthetics, however, the pair also share a passion for surfing.

"We spent about two years looking for the right place, the right building, that was also by the beach," Peter explains.



Trent's background in training as an architect has created a space that is as quirky as it is warm and inviting.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] The pair originally headed east from Lorne, investigating shops around the Port Arlinton area, before deciding to check out Port Fairy and finding not only fantastic surf, but the perfect, vacant building – although it didn't look perfect at the time.

"When we first saw this place, the walls in the whole back area were covered right up to the roof," Peter says of the thick bluestone walls that date back to the 1840s.

Peter and Trent took the plunge and started their gourmet pizza business at the front of the shop in 2012 which – with its retro interior, cool music and chilled, expert staff (some hail from Cookie and The Toff, in Melbourne) – set the tone for what was to come.

"It is the first time we have ever done anything like this, so we are still learning, but there has been a slow evolution and things have just grown and unfolded organically," Trent explains.

After developing a loyal following through their pizzas, Trent and Peter expanded by renovating the middle of the building to create a cosy bar that serves boutique beers and interesting wines and added a separate dining room at the rear that, through clever design, looks like it has been there forever.

"I love old things," Trent says of his interior design work that features exposed beams, candles piled with dripping wax and blached animal skulls.

"I love wood and stone and earthy, recycled materials and because we didn't have much money, we have worked with what was here," he says.

What was there included the idea for a business name, with the back alley behind the shop known as Coffin Alley because it originally led to an undertakers. The boys simply added an 's'.



Surfing and small business come together for Trent and Peter who spent two years looking for the right location before deciding on Port Fairy.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap]he bar opened in winter last year and, like the pizza shop before it, has become extraordinarily successful without one ounce of advertising, but simply word of mouth.

And the pair isn't finished yet. As part of their organic growth, they hope to eventually expand their kitchen and their menu while sticking to their philosophy of using only good quality produce.

"I think if you don't get too caught up in making money and just enjoy it, that is how we have taken each step so far," Peter says.

Besides, there is also surfing to be done.

Despite it being barely 10 degrees, Trent tells me that he, and his kelpie Anchovy, will be heading to the beach straight after our interview.

"It's a pretty good life," he laughs.



Candles burn well into the night
in the back bar...

[box type="bio"] **Coffin Sally is at 33 Sackville St, Port
Fairy. Winter opening times are Wed-Sunday. Ph: (03) 5568
2618[/box]**