

Council's racing hospitality bill hard to swallow



Revelations that the Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on a corporate hospitality tent at the May Races are hard to digest. Image source: Source: Vince Caligiuri/Getty Images AsiaPac

OPINION

As Warrnambool ratepayers prepare to swallow a 5.5 per cent rate rise this year, revelations that the Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on a hospitality tent at the May Races will be hard to digest.

A request by **Cr Peter Hulin** for more information about the council's marquee at the 2014 May Races has revealed that \$17,036 was spent on wining, dining and entertaining 90 guests.

The breakdown includes \$3762 for food, \$1489 for drinks, \$4950 for members reserve tickets and wristbands, \$6610 for the marquee (including staff, decorations, chairs etc) and \$225 for racebooks.

And the potential cost could have been as much as \$25,000, as 168 invitations were issued but only 90 accepted.

The WCC's policy on the event, which has been included in this week's meeting agenda, says the hospitality is intended to show the council's support for the May Racing Carnival, while also promoting the 142-year-old event to politicians, key bureaucrats and regional leaders.

It is also, apparently, a great place to do business: to discuss "strategic projects" (presumably in-between races), and to develop "organisation to organisation" relationships, whatever that might mean.



Just weeks before the WCC passed a budget that included a 5.5% rate rise, the wine was flowing in its corporate hospitality tent at the May Racing Carnival.

I don't know if you received an invitation to the marquee , but those who did included:

- **24** members of council and their partners (including each councillor, the CEO, Mayor and directors);
- **12** state and federal MPs,
- **9** senior government bureaucrats,
- **65** regional leaders (including South Coast Board members, Wannon Water executives, senior police, senior health executives, the Deakin University Vice-Chancellor and South-West TAFE CEO);
- and two of **Cr Brian Kelson's** business associates.

Another **56** people described as “groups and individuals working closely with council” were also extended the opportunity to enjoy a day by the track.

This group included representatives of [Maddocks Lawyers](#), a Melbourne-based legal firm that describes itself as one of the top 20 law firms in Australia and who, presumably, represents the council. I am not sure why top-of-the-town lawyers need to be wined and dined as part of developing “organisation to organisation” relationships.

This final group also included the President of [Commerce Warrnambool](#), a position currently held by **Tony Herbert**.

I find this intriguing for two reasons: first, that Commerce Warrnambool – at the time of the May Race Carnival – was deep in discussions with the council about its proposal to hit traders with [a new compulsory levy to raise \\$3 million over five years](#) to fund its activities. Indeed, the motion to set the levy in train was passed by the council just a fortnight later.

Being invited into the WCC hospitality marquee in the lead-up to that decision is the sort of access that traders fighting against the levy can only dream about.

Second, Commerce Warrnambool has argued that it needs funds from the levy to, among other things, act as a lobby group to council, but it appears that it is already well and truly

“inside the tent”.



We don't know, as yet, who actually made up the 90 people who attended the marquee and if they included Mr Herbert, who yesterday declined to say whether he accepted the invitation or not, or Cr Kelson's two unnamed business associates.

But what we do know is that such corporate largesse is difficult to justify when so many people in the south-west are struggling to make ends meet.

And it is even harder to justify when rates are rising at almost double the rate of inflation and double the interest rate on most savings accounts.

Wining and dining has long been a part of how business operates, but we are not talking here about a commercial company like Coles, or Telstra or McDonalds: we are talking about a local council that has *you* as its shareholders (ratepayers) and which should be leading by example.

I find this sort of corporate partying (aka “networking”) particularly galling when, at the same time as the council's

guests are sipping champagne and nibbling on canapes, there are literacy programs, arts projects, history projects, health projects, environmental projects and many other small, but important community projects all struggling to secure funding from an ever-shrinking pool.

While it must be easy to lose perspective when you are dealing with tens of millions of dollars, as the council does, to each and every one of these community projects, \$17,000 is still a lot of money.

No doubt those people who attended the race day had a marvellous time and perhaps even came away feeling a little more connected, inspired and ready to do business with the council, if they weren't already.

But to me, the corporate marquee revelations are cause for a very bad case of indigestion.

Trader levy shaping up for legal showdown



The proposed Warrnambool traders levy is heading for legal action unless it is withdrawn by the council at its meeting next Monday.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]P[/dropcap]lans to hit traders with a compulsory levy to raise \$3 million over five years for [Commerce Warrnambool](#) are headed for court unless the Warrnambool City Council puts a stop to the levy immediately.

Commerce Warrnambool and the [Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) agreed to not talk publicly about the levy while negotiations were underway between the two, but don't think for a moment they have struck a deal.

In fact, it is the opposite.

In a hard-hitting letter sent to all councillors and council Chief Executive Officer Bruce Anson last week, the traders are asking the council to withdraw the levy proposal at its meeting next Monday (21/7), or it will take legal action

against Commerce Warrnambool to prevent it from acting outside its legal powers.

The first step in that process is an injunction issued by the Magistrates' Court.

Before delivering this ultimatum out of sheer exasperation, the W'bool Traders Action Group spent a lot of time identifying where it believes Commerce Warrnambool has breached its legal requirements as an incorporated body and hoped that something would be done to address these concerns.

It also, despite weeks of discussion between the two groups, is still waiting for answers to its questions about how the levy has been justified.

It appears the traders have finally run out patience.



The Warrnambool Traders Action Group has questioned how many “head offices” of major businesses have verbally supported the levy idea.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]W[/dropcap]ith their gloves firmly off, the traders have, in their letter, accused

Commerce Warrnambool of making “false and misleading” claims about the level of support for the levy, which would raise \$600,000 in its first year and rise by 5 per cent each year.

In arguing why the levy should go ahead, Commerce Warrnambool said its consultant, Peter McNabb, had visited more than 900 businesses to explain how the levy would work and that this resulted in signed support from more than 150 traders.

The W’bool Traders Action Group says it has since spoken to more than 300 businesses and found less than 20 who were formally consulted: most found out about the levy through the media.

(As an aside, *Bluestone* asked the council if it had seen the 150 signed forms of support and was told that they had been “viewed by council staff”, but presumably not the elected councillors.)

Similarly, Commerce Warrnambool said its consultant received verbal support (ie. via telephone) from 150 corporate businesses who have their head offices outside of Warrnambool – a claim the traders describe as “fanciful” because finding the right person to speak to in corporations is difficult, let alone gaining their “verbal support” for anything.

And it doesn’t stop there.



[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]T[/dropcap]he Traders Action Group goes on to reveal in its letter that the “purpose” of the Commerce Warrnambool Strategic Business Plan – as stated

in the business plan – is actually the “purpose” of the Swan Hill Incorporated plan (which Peter McNabb and Associates also developed) and has nothing to do with the objectives of Commerce Warrnambool.

There are also allegations of threatening, potentially libelous emails being sent from a member of Commerce Warrnambool to two members of the Traders Action Group.

Put simply, the levy proposal is a mess and, as a result, Commerce Warrnambool is in a mess.

This is a shame, because the city *needs* a robust Chamber of Commerce – something the W’bool Traders Action Group also agrees on – but how that body is funded, and what it does, needs more investigation and discussion.

I have [written previously](#) about how chambers of commerce in other regional cities use memberships and corporate sponsorships to survive and how they are primarily focussed on lobbying, networking and professional development: not things like Christmas decorations, ‘buy local’ campaigns and promoting the local football finals.



*To stop the proposed
Commerce Warrnambool
levy*

*You must **OBJECT***

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]I[/dropcap]n addition, we still don’t know – if the levy was to go through – what Commerce Warrnambool will deliver in its first year, beyond some very broad-brush goals that require a huge leap of faith that the \$600,000 will be well spent.

Our elected officials have an opportunity, next Monday, to put the brakes on the whole levy proposal and Commerce Warrnambool has an opportunity to start over, with a view to building a robust plan for its future that has solid – rather than fractured – support.

The most likely result, however, is that the council will vote to defer the levy process until later in the year, which really helps neither side and only extends the war.

The council might prefer to stay in limbo, but the traders have made it clear that they will not.

This time, time has run out.

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Traders levy takes a new twist



The traders levy for Warrnambool has taken a twist, with a proposal that half of the cost be shifted to general council funds.

OPINION – CAROL ALTMANN

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] P [/dropcap]lans to [introduce a new trader levy](#) to raise \$3 million over five years for Commerce Warrnambool have taken a dramatic twist.

A Facebook post by Commerce Warrnambool (CW) president Tony Herbert has revealed that CW is no longer seeking \$600,000 a year from the trader levy, but \$300,000 – with the remaining \$300,000 to come straight from the Warrnambool City Council coffers.

This new idea is central to the negotiations between CW and the Warrnambool Traders Action Group – with Mayor Michael Neoh sitting in the middle – to try and reach a compromise, after the initial levy proposal sparked an angry and rolling protest.

It might look like an attempt at a compromise, but to me it sounds like policy on the run and former Labor leader Kevin Rudd is living proof of where that can lead: disaster.

Commerce Warrnambool no doubt has noble intentions in trying to raise funds to spend on promoting Warrnambool, but its proposals continue to raise more questions than they answer.

Shifting half of the cost burden from traders to general ratepayers does not change the need for a full and robust discussion on *how* the funds will be spent.

It also raises the question of whether this is the best use of \$1.5 million of public funds. (Especially when the council is already spending close to \$1 million a year on propping up Fun4Kids and Flagstaff Hill).

Indeed this new idea, if it is accepted, only widens the discussion – from traders to the general community – and we should now *all* be invited to have a say.

Bluestone Magazine is not alone in its concerns.



Mayor Michael Neoh is in the middle of the negotiations between angry traders and Commerce Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [dropcap]s it so happens, not only did we stumble across Mr Herbert's Facebook post today, but the council sent us a wad of documents in response to a Freedom of Information request we lodged in late May regarding the levy.

We are still working our way through these documents and will reveal more over time, but email correspondence between the council's Director of City Growth, Bill Millard, and Commerce Warrnambool as recently as April this year indicates that both councillors and Council Chief Executive Officer Bruce Anson wanted to see much more detail on how the first \$600,000 would be spent.

"I think one of the things you guys do need to work on is

answering the question that Bruce asked Richard (Montgomery, from CW) ie. what is the \$600k going to be spent on in year one, remembering that council needs to sign on to the quantum and the KPIs," Mr Millard wrote on March 6.

"Personally, I think you need to be definitive here. It will hurt your overall push if the councillors don't know what the money will be spent on."

You were not wrong there, Bill!

Mr Millard wrote another email dated April 1 – just weeks before the levy process was approved by the council – indicating councillors were still seeking critical details.

The email is too long to reproduce in full here, but it summarises the questions from councillors, including, again, the need for some firm details on how the money will be spent in the first year, how Commerce Warrnambool decided on the figure of \$600,000 as an annual total, and what was the level of support for the levy among traders.

I would strongly argue that these questions still stand.



[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap] spoke to Mr Herbert today and he said he was hopeful of reaching some middle ground, although he did not wish to go into any further detail because the negotiations were at a critical stage.

"Members of Commerce Warrnambool and Warrnambool Traders

Action Group are working together with the council to try and get an outcome that is hopefully more suitable," he said.

The trader action group has put forward a compromise of their own which, I understand, has already been knocked on the head by Commerce Warrnambool.

Their suggestion was to withdraw the levy proposal, have key members of the action group join the Commerce Warrnambool board and start from scratch as a united group.

This united group would review the business plan, look at how other towns run their Chambers of Commerce and come up with a fresh approach to council by November.

Perhaps that would provide the breathing space that this whole messy proposal so desperately needs.

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Remembering the art of Robert Ulmann



The late Robert Ulmann was one of Warrnambool's best known artists – and one of the city's great characters – after making the south-west his home in 1969. Image: [Visit Warrnambool](#).

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] 0[/dropcap]ur [campaign to restore](#) the **Robert Ulmann** whale mural in Warrnambool has provided an opportunity to remember one of south-west Victoria's most prolific artists, who died 15 years ago this November.

Despite Robert's enormous contribution to the local art scene as a painter and sculptor during the 30 years that he lived in and around Warrnambool, it is quite difficult to find any

formal, public recognition of his work, beyond that which he created himself.

This includes his [studio and gallery](#) overlooking the ocean on Hopkins Point Road, Warrnambool, which is still managed by his wife, **Helen** and daughter **Justine**, and was built after their Naringal property (and Robert's studio) was completely destroyed in the devastating Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

It also includes Robert's contribution to Warrnambool's public artworks, which is arguably greater than any other single artist.

There are four Ulmann sculptures dotted in high-profile locations around Warrnambool and two privately commissioned murals that are also in very public spaces, but [a search of the Warrnambool Art Gallery website](#) reveals very little about the man or his work.

As an aside, do you know where to find the Ulmann sculptures and murals in Warrnambool?

[learn_more caption="Click here to find an Ulmann work:"] 1. Fletcher Jones Gardens, basalt sculpture, Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones.

2. Warrnambool breakwater, basalt sculpture, The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture.

3. Flagstaff Hill, lake side, The Lady in the Wind, Mt Gambier stone.

4. Warrnambool Art Gallery, exterior, The Australian Fur Seal, basalt sculpture

5. Bojangles Restaurant, Warrnambool, mural

6. Flaxman St milk bar, Warrnambool, mural [/learn_more]



The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture, Warrnambool, created by Ulmann in 1990.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] R [/dropcap]obert, who was born in Switzerland, was a larger-than-life character who created an impression on all those he met, even if it was one of slight terror at the sight of what has been described as his “fierce” beard which would bob up and down during his highly animated way of talking.

His arrival in south-west Victoria in 1969 made the local news at the time and Warrnambool historian, **Jenny Fawcett**, has kept a copy of the clipping from *The Warrnambool Standard* in which it was reported that “an interesting personality” was visiting the district with his locally born wife, Helen (Goldstraw).

Robert, it said, “has had an adventurous life, painting and drawing his way through 21 countries,” that included Canada, where he first met Helen, who was working as a school teacher at Coppermine in the Canadian Arctic. It was here that

Robert worked closely with the Canadian first peoples, the Inuit.

The Ulmann's spent two years criss-crossing North and South America and then wended their way down through the Pacific Islands before finally reaching Australia. They settled in Naringal in 1972, having first spent a couple of years working in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

With all of that experience, and all of that adventure, no wonder Warrnambool – at times – would have struggled to contain a personality as large and dynamic as Robert's, but he came to call the seaside town his home.



The basalt "Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones", created by Ulmann in 1978 and part of the Fletcher Jones Gardens in Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] A [/dropcap]uthor **Penny Olsen** dedicated her 2001 book, *Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australia Bird Art (2001)*, to Robert Ulmann, who passed away during its production. In it, she describes how

Robert worked “from nature, fast and with gusto”.

Robert loved to capture the energy of both animals and people as he saw them in the moment, not after the fact. It was not unusual to be talking to Robert and find that, halfway through a conversation, he would start sketching a portrait of you.

It was Robert’s passion for Australian wildlife, however, that won the hearts of so many of his followers.

He not only painted, sketched and photographed the beautiful creatures around him, he often invited them into his home which became a refuge for homeless and abandoned birds, mammals and marsupials.

In 1980, *The Age* newspaper ran a page 3 story about the Ulmann’s being the first people in Australia – and most likely the world – to hand-raise a baby echidna that developed a fondness for crawling up Robert’s trouser leg.

When asked why he loved to work on Australian animals, Robert told the reporter in typical style:

“You know why? They’re bloody hard to get hold of, specially the marsupials. They’re all nocturnal. That’s what makes the challenge...and people love furry things – specially the ladies.”

Robert died suddenly at the age of 71 on November 1, 1999.



A portion of the colourful – and cheeky – Mr Bojangles murals in the Bojangles restaurant, Warrnambool, painted by Ulmann in the 1980s.

[box type="bio"] **The Robert Ulmann studio is at 440 Hopkins Point Rd, Warrnambool ph: 03 5565 1444 or email: eubalena@westvic.com.au. Free entry.**[/box]

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Revealing the eye of the tiger: Peter Clayfield



Photographer – and collector – Peter Clayfield in his mini museum of a lounge room: “I have always been what you might call acquisitive”.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] P[dropcap]hotographer **Peter Clayfield** lives on the edge of a cliff which, on a clear day, has the sort of view that stretches all the way to Tasmania – well, almost.

The invisible thread that connects his home overlooking the Southern Ocean to the rugged coastline of north-west Tasmania is symbolic, as Peter has a self-confessed obsession with the

thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) and has devoted a large part of his life to collecting imagery of the animal.

“It started when I was about 15 and my parents bought me a book about the thylacine and from that point I was hooked,” he says.

Peter now owns more than a dozen books on the subject and, perhaps more importantly, a couple of hundred pieces of thylacine imagery including lithographs, 19th Century etchings, hand-coloured engravings, antique prints and more modern incarnations that he has collected from around the world.

“The thylacine is a very potent symbol of the environmental movement and this is part of its appeal to me, that symbolism,” he explains.



The poster to be used for Peter's collection of thylacine material that will be exhibited at the Warrnambool Art Gallery later this month.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A[/dropcap] substantial chunk of Peter's collection is now with the **Warrnambool Art Gallery** in preparation for his exhibition that opens on July 25 and will run concurrently with the [Glenn Morgan retrospective](#).

"Recapturing the tiger: a personal collection of thylacine imagery from past and present" is a departure from what most people have come to expect from Peter's exhibitions, which normally showcase his exquisite photography.

An alumni of the now defunct Warrnambool Institute/Deakin University Diploma of Visual Art, Peter has exhibited over the past 30 years in just about every gallery in Warrnambool – past and present – and is known for his ability to transform every day urban landscapes, people and objects.

"Those art classes in the 80s opened up a new world to me about the possibilities with photography, especially by being exposed to the great photographers and artists in the US and Europe," he explains.

Peter recalls, in particular, how the head photography lecturer **Ian Cosier** would stock the campus library with books by photographers that came to be major influences on his work, including **Diane Arbus**, **Henri Cartier Bresson** and the wonderfully named **Ralph Eugene Meatyard**.



Peter's photography is known for capturing the unusual in the usual, like these topiaries draped in protective netting.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] Peter now has a collection of books by these same artists, among many others, that line the walls of his cosy lounge-room which is, in itself, a work of art because of the many rare and beautiful objects that he has accumulated. Thylacines are only a part of it.

"I have always been what you might call acquisitive," he says with a soft laugh.

It is difficult to describe the scope and diversity of what has caught Peter's eye over the years, but imagine squashing the Smithsonian Institute into a small cottage and you are getting close.

Among his eclectic tastes are tribal masks and carvings, delicate silver spoons, palm-sized ceramic bowls, select

pieces of Australian pottery, charms, chimes and dozens of animal and religious bells that create the most wonderful sounds.



Peter's house on the edge of the world where, on a good day, you can almost spot Tasmania.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T[/dropcap]he complete Peter Clayfield Collection may well be an exhibition of the future, and deservedly so, but for the moment the spotlight will remain on the thylacine which, some believe, still exists in parts of north-west Tasmania.

Does Peter?

He pauses to consider his answer.

"Definitely in the 60s and 70s, yes, but those areas in which it was living have since been heavily logged," he says.

"I guess I have a faint hope that it might still be surviving in those very remote areas, but it is only a faint hope."

[box] ***Recapturing the tiger*** will be officially opened at the W'bool Art Gallery on July 25 by Dr Carol Freeman, author of ***Paper Tiger: a visual history of the thylacine***.[/box]

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