

New figures confirm Flagstaff Hill is done and dusted



The new advertising campaign has failed to produce any major increase in visitor numbers.

By Carol Altmann

New, full-year figures for Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village confirm that despite a \$3 million upgrade, the village is in a death spiral.

As I [wrote a couple of weeks ago](#), the reality is a lot worse than the pumped up picture given by adding free visitor numbers to the totals.

Earlier this week Warrnambool City councillors were told that **only 50,000 people** paid to visit the site or attend the [revamped sound and light show](#) in 2017-18. (Just for comparison, Sovereign Hill averages more than 450,000 visitors a year).

I can almost hear their jaws hitting the table.

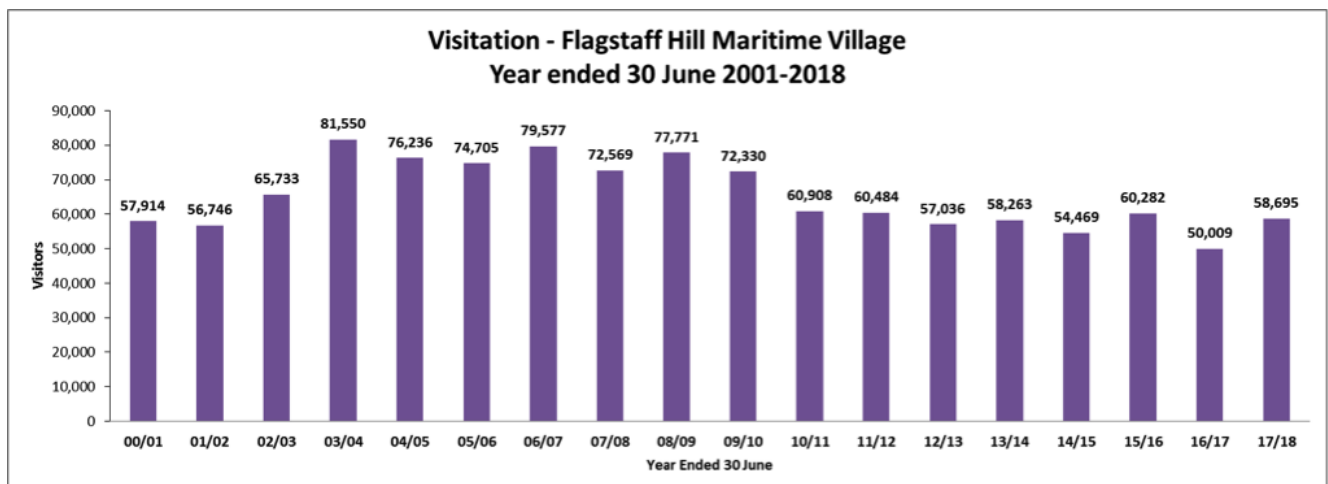
Another 8500 people, roughly, turned up for free events in 2017-18 and while that might make us feel good, it is not helping to pay the bills. In fact it adds to them.

To be super clear, 50,000 paying visitors is not sustainable. The village needs at least 80,000 to break even, and more if it is ever – ever – to turn a profit like it used to back in the 70s and 80s.

As it stands, the council is paying more than \$500,000 a year to keep the village afloat. This financial year and next, it expects to spend a total of \$1.1 million.

What an absolute waste of money and what really grates my wick is that all of this was so utterly predictable.

The council knew, tourism experts knew, and even Blind Freddy Down The Street was on top of it, that sticking a \$3 million BandAid on top of a weeping wound is not going to fix it.



Yearly figures released to the Warrnambool City councillors this week. They include free entries that average 7000 a year. The village was closed for six weeks in 2016-17.

Four years ago, Flagstaff Hill was seriously weeping.

An [expensive masterplan commissioned by the council](#) concluded that to make any real difference, to actually turn the place around and give it a whole new lease of life, it would have to spend close to \$15 million.

We didn't have \$15 million to spend.

So what do you do? Like a home renovator who has run out of money, do you keep trying to patch the house up, or do you cut your losses and move on?

Our council decided to keep patching: Maremma dogs, *Oddball*, a new light and sound show about hunting whales, hologram characters instead of real people, a new entrance, stuffed toys...patch, patch, patch.

And meanwhile the poor volunteers – without them we would be in even deeper trouble – and the exhausted council staff just kept trying their best while avoiding the bleeding obvious that the cobblestoned pathways weaving through the village were mostly empty.



Flagstaff Hill is a site with huge potential, but the conversation on its future needs to start now.

Ratepayers and taxpayers have every right to be outraged by this waste of money.

We have been let down by our leaders and decision makers and fed a steady, fatty diet of bullshit and spin and now, here we are, with no plan for the future of Flagstaff Hill.

That clear-eyed planning should have started at least five years ago, when the numbers began to slide and the writing was on the wall that Flagstaff Hill has had its day.

It is not Sovereign Hill – which operates under an entirely different structure and system – and it is not IMAX. It was great, once, but times have changed...dramatically.

Now we know the truth, we need to ask our council to set out a new vision for the Flagstaff Hill site.

What does it have in mind? What are the possibilities? What are the limitations? (Being on Crown land is one of them).

The Flagstaff Hill site is magnificent. The views are spectacular and the lighthouse section is authentic, historic and already showing its appeal as accommodation. What's next?

Whatever happens, we can't do it on our own. It will need partnerships or investors or entrepreneurs to not only help set the course, but to fund it.

We only have to look across at the revitalised Fletcher Jones site, currently being transformed into The Warrnambool Motor Museum, to see what is possible. A decade ago, that site was almost given up for dead.

The same can happen with Flagstaff Hill, but we need to ring the bell and start turning away from the rocks now, or the greatest shipwreck of all will be itself.

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