

Snow White, the Seven Dwarfs and the city of WooBoo



Snow White and the seven elected members of WooBoo, including Grumpy, all working to make life better for its citizens.

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

This is a budgetary fairytale based on fact. The numbers are real, the names are not.

Once upon a time, in the town of WooBoo, there was a town leader, Snow White, who was paid more than \$310,000 a year to work for the seven dwarfs who had been elected by the people of WooBoo to look after WooBoo and help it prosper.

Exciting things were happening in WooBoo under Snow White's leadership.

There was a big, money-losing festival for children, there was a maritime museum with few boats but a new \$3 million sound-and-light show that promised to lure carloads of tourists,

there were parties at the racecourse, new public toilets, new parking meters, pretty roundabouts and still lots of money left over for the WooBoo Council to spend on consultants, credit cards, conferences and staff development.

Most of the seven dwarfs were ecstatic, except for Grumpy. Every council has a Grumpy, and Grumpy was seen as a troublemaker.

“Can we afford all this?” Grumpy would ask. “Does this all add up? Why don’t some of these figures make sense?”

“Of course we can,” said Doc and Happy in unison. Unlike some of the other dwarfs, they had represented the Town of WooBoo for many years and had grown fond of Snow White and her team of highly paid helpers.

Mayor Sneezy was equally as enthusiastic: “WooBoo is aspirational, sophisticated and cosmopolitan and I wish people would stop being so negative!”

The spending went on. Sometimes it was on necessary but boring things, like \$5.5 million for a drainage system to avoid parts of WooBoo flooding.



The glittering, shiny upgrade of Justice von Liebig St

started at \$15 million....

And sometimes it was for sparkly things, and the biggest of all was the \$15 million upgrade of the main street of WooBoo, with shiny new pavements, new trees, new lights, drinking fountains, more flowers and planter boxes and a much narrower road with so many pedestrian crossings that WooBoo drivers could no longer take their eyes off the road for a second.

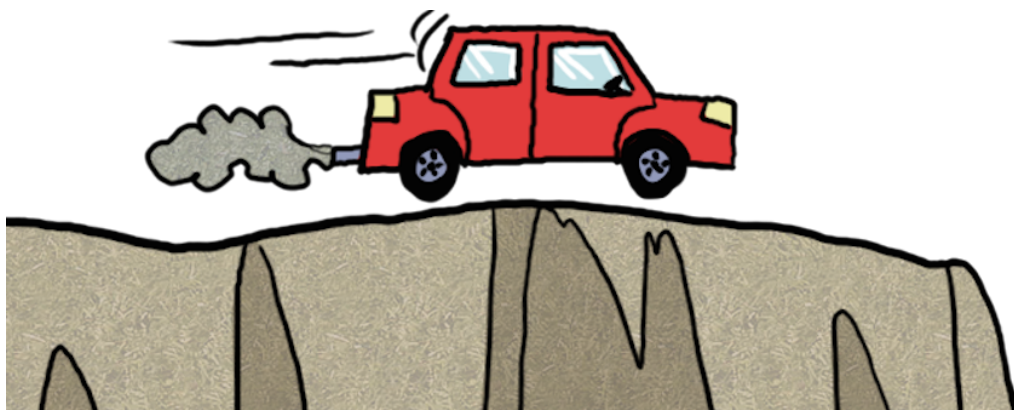
The people of WooBoo were happy to see their tired main street being given the full Ritz treatment, even if they privately wondered what was going to happen to the other town streets with their peeling buildings and broken footpaths.

Don't worry, they were told, celebrate the rise of wonderful Justice Von Liebig St!

Meanwhile, in the MelBoo office of the chief money watcher, the Victorian Auditor-General, a little red light was flashing.

It had been flashing quietly every year since 2014-15 and it warned a "high risk" situation was developing. This high risk was that the Town of WooBoo did not have enough money of its own to fund its operations, once it removed all the one-off gifts and grants from Grandma and Grandpa Government.

In particular, the Auditor General found WooBoo might have trouble paying to repair and replace things once they wore out, like footpaths and playgrounds and bridges.



Excuse me, is that a cliff? No, surely not?

The red light blinked, but in the town chambers of WooBoo the party went on until, one day in late 2018, it stopped.

By then, Grandma Government had put her foot down and capped rates so councils could not just keep asking ratepayers for more. Instead, annual rate rises would be capped at between 2% and 2.5%.

By then, the money-losing WooBoo children's festival had been axed abruptly. By then, it was becoming clear that the carloads of tourists were not going to the maritime museum.

The seven dwarfs had to absorb some hard truths.

One of these was that the WooBoo capital works budget for 2017-18 had blown out by a whopping \$6 million from \$17.6 million to \$24.6 million.

A big part of this was dressing up Justice Von Liebig St, the cost of which had grown from \$15 million to around \$19 million, including \$8 million that would need to come from the citizens of WooBoo.

The big drainage project had also been in trouble, with the first contractor going broke and the final cost still not known until it is all finished.

On top of this, recycling fees had skyrocketed, the cost of keeping a pet had shot up, parking in WooBoo was more expensive, rates would still rise, and there was still not enough money for all the old roads, pavements and playgrounds to be repaired.

Things were suddenly not so good.



Snow White at her farewell function before taking early retirement and moving to her seaside castle.

Grumpy thumped the table and yelled “I told you so!” and this time Mayor Sneezy agreed with him.

Happy and Doc, being astute in the art of public relations, told the people of WooBoo that they were committed to tackling a crisis that they had “inherited” and the only way to do this was to ask the people what they thought, ignore that, and then seek to bust the rate cap anyway.

The three other dwarfs, who were still trying to get their heads around it all, nodded in agreement.

And so, dear reader, hi-ho, hi-ho, off to the Essential Services Commission we go.

And what of Snow White?

Ah, she sensibly retired early to her castle by the seaside, from where she watches the hard-working people of WooBoo rise up and prepare to march past the empty grounds of the maritime museum, and down the glittering, gridlocked avenue of Justice

Von Liebig St, named, as it so happens, for the German industrial chemist who invented fertiliser to replace cow dung.

The End.

[For those who want to go deeper, you can find the Auditor-General's [red light here](#) on the WCC's adjusted underlying result, page 79. The WCC 2018-19 budget [is here](#). You can find the capital works details at item 4.5.1 on page 45.]