

Investigation launched into Flagstaff Hill

EXCLUSIVE: An investigation has been launched into Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum over its handling of the collection...

Abbott actions reveal toxic culture in council

Opinion: The toxic culture within the WCC.

Are missing Loch Ard ingots the tip of the iceberg?

In our first Opinion piece of the year, we ask if the Loch Ard ingots missing from Flagstaff Hill are just the tip of the iceberg...

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The proposed Warrnambool traders levy is heading for legal action unless it is withdrawn by the council at its meeting next Monday.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

[button link="http://the-terrier.com.au/subscribe-2/" type="icon" icon="heart" newwindow="yes"] Did you enjoy this story? Please subscribe here to help Bluestone thrive.[/button]



Read more Opinion pieces here...

[Forget cover ups: roll right over Rolf](#)

[Community vision should extend city wide: Julie Eagles](#)

[Flagstaff Hill at \\$15 million crossroad](#)

[Trader levy takes a new twist](#)

[Scrap trader levy and start over](#)

[Traders are right to be asking questions](#)

[New levy to raise \\$600k for what?](#)

[What is holding Portland back?](#)

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] 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.

[button link="http://the-terrier.com.au/subscribe-2/" type="icon" icon="heart" newwindow="yes"] Did you enjoy this story? Please subscribe here to help Bluestone thrive.[/button]



You can find more Opinion pieces here...

[Forget cover ups: roll right over Rolf](#)

[Community vision should extend city wide: Julie Eagles](#)

[Flagstaff Hill at \\$15 million crossroad](#)

[Scrap trader levy and start over](#)

[Motor museum to revive Fletcher Jones](#)

[Traders are right to be asking questions](#)