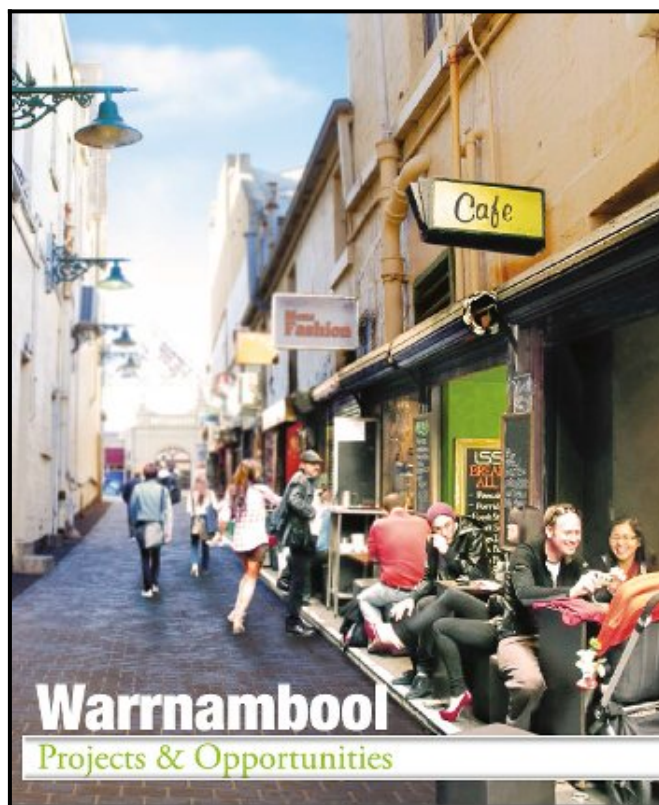


Be all things or stick to the basics?



The dream: an image of bustling cafes built into the sides of Warrnambool's laneways graces the cover of the council's recently released priority 'wish list'.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] C
[/dropcap]ouncils were once primarily responsible for rates, roads and rubbish: my, how times have changed.

The [16-point list of advocacy priorities](#) released by the Warrnambool City Council suggests that the council must now be all things to all people, fixing everything from school retention rates, to unemployment, to developing the region's

food export industry...right down to upgrading the stormwater drains. But is this what ratepayers really want or expect?

Sixteen points is a lot of priorities for a council covering only 32,000 people and they can't possibly all be met, especially when we struggle to get the public toilets right.

I say this because as I was walking back from a media briefing on the plan last week, I wandered past the vandalised portable toilet box on Gilles St, across the road from the heritage precinct of the former police station and court house.

Having only been back in Warrnambool a relatively short time, I thought these toilets must have been installed for the comfort of the workmen repairing the former post office nearby.

A google search, however, revealed the eyesore is considered [a public toilet and has been sitting there since 2011](#) while the council finalises its public toilet strategy.

My heart sank. If it takes more than three years to sort out the public lavatories, what hope is there of achieving the bulk of the 16 priorities that had just been outlined to the media by **Mayor Michael Neoh** and **CEO Bruce Anson**?

Moreover, do we need to have 16 priorities? What about focussing on five, securing the funding for these, and doing them really, really well? (We will list our top five later).



The reality: the 'temporary' toilet block on Gilles St indicates that making progress on some projects can take years.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W
[/dropcap]hile there is nothing wrong with thinking big and aiming high, we have three levels of government for the simple reason that each one looks after different levels of responsibility.

Ratepayers, I suspect, want a local council to focus on maintaining and improving their local amenities, to ensure that their city is a good looking and vibrant place where people want to live, work or visit for an unforgettable holiday.

Given this, it was heartening to hear Mr Anson list the revitalisation of the CBD as the *number one* priority, but there was scant detail on how this would be done, and by when. (*Since this piece was written, WCC has announced it is seeking an architect to redesign the portion of Liebig St between Koroit St and Raglan Parade*).

The gradual rejuvenation of some of the city's laneways – a wonderful council project – is an example of what can happen, yet the F Project artists behind all of this hard work are scrimping and scraping to develop their art space down at The Artery, in Timor St.

[The Artery](#) has the potential to utterly transform what was a bland part of the CBD and to draw tourists in droves, but unfortunately this simple project has received very little council money.

At the same time, the council says in its latest document that it hopes to secure \$100,000 for a “comprehensive study” into food production in south-west Victoria and potential export markets. Why? Isn't this the domain of the State Government and, more particularly the local member, **Denis Napthine**? Or perhaps it is even better suited to the Federal Government, and our local member, **Dan Tehan**?



The Artery artists' hub in Timor St has the potential to be a magnet for tourists and locals alike.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]L[/dropcap]obbying the other two tiers of government is part of what local councils do, but do we really want to secure and spend \$100,000 on another study in the process?

Even a portion of this money would go a long way toward, for example, The Artery being able to open its retail space, gallery and studios – heck, they might even be able to get their signwriting done.

To be fair, the council's priority list does contain some good, grassroots project such as upgrading the dated public swimming pool and working on a plan to improve the equally dated and tiny library, but it also contains a chunk of 'priorities' that have been around for so long now, most of us have forgotten when they were first announced, such as sorting out the future of the Fletcher Jones site, Flagstaff Hill and the railway station precinct.



Warrnambool will receive a longer airport runway, but the trains will still be slow, unreliable and crowded.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]S[/dropcap]peaking of the railway, improving the inadequate train service to Melbourne has been another, long-standing priority that has again been wish-listed by the council, yet it is the [extension of the Warrnambool airport runway](#) that is taking precedence for \$4.5 million in state and federal funding.

The number of people who use this runway will be minuscule compared to the number of train commuters who already struggle to find a seat on a service that operates only three times a day and lumbers along at a Cobb-and-Co-like speed of 74 kph.

We should be outraged, especially as our compatriots in Bendigo, Ballarat and even Traralgon each have more than a dozen services a day, including a number of express trains.

A fast, reliable commuter service between Warrnambool and Melbourne is also critical to tourism, yet there is no indication that the service will receive another cent from either the state or federal governments.

The council has developed an enormous [amount of strategic plans and strategies](#) – the latest one brings the total to 32 in the past 10 years – but my fear is that it is spreading itself too thin, that it expends too much time and money reaching for the stars rather than dealing with the basics, and that, like the toilet box in Gilles St, it will ultimately struggle to be flush with success.

[box] **Below are Bluestone's five funding priorities (what are yours?):**[/box]

- Secure and save the best of the Fletcher Jones site and gardens and lobby for state funds to make it happen. This site is critical to creating a sense of 'arrival' to Warrnambool and has the [potential to be something very special](#).
- Fix the train service with more frequent, faster and

reliable trains that include express services.

- [Revitalise the CBD](#) by, for example, offering incentives to restore and repair the heritage buildings, remove the parking meters and create a true restaurant precinct.
- Finish the sensational foreshore bike path by, as previously suggested by the council, linking it back through Lake Pertobe to the railway station. People would travel to Warrnambool (on a fast train) just to ride this path – I have already met some.
- Upgrade the [whale watching precinct](#) into the world-class attraction that it should be.



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[Broken link for Artlink](#)

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