

WCC rate rise and May Racing Carnival corporate tent

Budgets are tight, but the W'bool City Council's corporate tent at the May Racing carnival is untouchable.

Races, rates and rubbery figures

ANALYSIS: is this WCC fuel-guzzler really necessary?

You paid for the party – here's who came..



Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on a corporate hospitality tent at the May Races earlier this year.
Image source: Source: Vince Caligiuri/Getty Images AsiaPac

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] R [[/dropcap]eaders will recall that [earlier this year](#) we revealed exclusively that the Warrnambool City Council spent \$17,000 on hosting a corporate hospitality tent at the May Racing Carnival.

Today we can tell you who actually attended.

While the WCC has not revealed the names of those who accepted an invitation, they have released to *Bluestone* the positions of the 97 people who attended, which make for interesting reading.

I say interesting because, as we noted in our first story, the hospitality event is intended to do a number of things including: show support for the May Racing Carnival; promote it to senior politicians, bureaucrats and regional leaders; to

discuss “strategic projects” and, lastly, develop “organisation to organisation” relationships.

Yet the guest list reveals that, of the 97 attendees, almost half (45) were connected to council either as employees, councillors (and their partners), or as members of the council’s various advisory committees.



Of the guests who accepted invitations to the marquee, half were connected to council either as staff, elected members of through advisory committees. Image: REUTERS/Victor Fraile

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W [/dropcap]annon MP **Dan Tehan** came along, as did all five **State Members for Victoria**, but of the nine senior government bureaucrats invited, only one – the regional manager for **VicRoads** – was able to make it.

Regional leaders made a better showing, with 10 representatives (including, I assume, some partners) of the **Great South Coast Board** attending, no doubt catching up with fellow board members **Mayor Michael Neoh** and Council chief executive **Bruce Anson**.

Opportunities to discuss “strategic projects” also looked very

promising with the inclusion of 9 members of a **Changchun** delegation – Changchun being the Chinese sister-city to Warrnambool – but lost a little of its lustre when it was clarified that the delegation was one that would be travelling *from* Warrnambool to China, not the other way round.

So did we, as ratepayers, receive \$17,036 worth of networking and promotional opportunities from this event, or should it be more correctly framed as an opportunity for the invitees to just relax and let their hair down? You can decide.

The list of acceptances is below, while [the full invitation list can be accessed here.](#)

[box]

WARRNAMBOOL CITY COUNCIL MAY RACES HOSPITALITY MARQUEE 2014-ATTENDEES

1. WARRNAMBOOL CITY COUNCIL :

Warrnambool City Council Mayor & Councillors & Partners **16**

Warrnambool City Council Chief Executive, Directors & Partners **5**

2. STATE & FEDERAL GOVERNMENT POLITICIANS

Federal Member for Wannon **1**

State Members for Western Victoria (there are five in total) **6**

3. SENIOR STATE GOVERNMENT STAFF

VicRoads, Regional Manager **1**

4. REGIONAL LEADERS

Great South Coast Board Members:

Corangamite Shire **2**

Glenelg Shire 2

Moyne Shire 4

Three independent board members 2

Wannon Water:

Managing director 1

Chairman 2

Education:

Deakin University, Head of Warrnambool Campus 2

Regional Tourism Board Members:

Five independent board members 3

Regional Tourism Board 1

Barwon South-West RDA Committee:

Eleven board members 4

Police:

Inspector Local Area Commander Warrnambool, Moyne, Corangamite
Police Service Area 2

Health:

CEO South-West Healthcare 2

CEO Lyndoch 2

CEO and President Western District Employment Access 1

Warrnambool Cheese and Butter:

Chief Executive Officer 1

5. GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS WORKING CLOSELY WITH COUNCIL:

Maddocks Lawyers 1

Members of WCC Advisory Committees:

Audit Committee 6

City Landscape Committee 2

Livestock Exchange Advisory Committee 7

International Relations Advisory Committee 6

Flagstaff Hill Advisory Committee 2

City Health and Wellbeing Advisory Committee 1

Changchun delegation group (from Warrnambool to China):

10 members of delegation and partners: 9

Commerce Warrnambool:

President 1

6. OTHERS

Cr Kelson's business associates 2

[/box]

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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.

We still have jumps racing? Can't get over it



Regardless of the spectacle, the harsh reality is racehorses are continuing to die as a result of jumps racing in Victoria. Image courtesy of The Age.

As Victoria continues to buck the trend on placing a ban on jumps racing, we ask if steeplechasing really is integral to the success of the Warrnambool May Racing Carnival.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

Here we are at that awkward time of year again in Warrnambool when the city's biggest local sporting event – the [May Racing Carnival](#) featuring the Grand Annual Steeplechase – is also the most difficult to embrace.

For no matter how we dress it up, the reality is that jumps racing is on the nose and has been for many years.

Despite this, the powerful figures that surround the “sport” continue to tell us that horses love jumping, that the local economy would wilt without the jumps races, and that those campaigning to have jumps racing stopped are just a bunch of lefty loopies without a sense of fun.

One of the most vocal “lefty loopies” is, of course, that highly radical and subversive organisation, the RSPCA, which has [an ongoing campaign](#) against the practice on the grounds of animal cruelty.

It appears that the RSPCA is welcome to tackle battery hens, sow stalls, duck shooting, puppy farms and run the cheerful Million Paws Walk, but if it dares to go near the sanctity of the steeplechase, it is accused of being “grandstanding hypocrites,” guilty of euthanasing thousands of unwanted cats and dogs each year.

That is how the former head of the Australian Jumps Racing Association, Rodney Rae, [described the RSPCA president](#) Dr Hugh Wirth in 2011, disregarding the fact that the RSPCA is the group that mops up the sad mess left behind by irresponsible pet owners around Australia.



The Grand National Steeplechase in the United Kingdom remains one of the most controversial races in the world due to a high number of horse fatalities. Image courtesy of The Huffington Post.

But let's return to jumps racing.

As most people know, this is a sport that no longer exists in any other states except for Victoria and South Australia. Jumps racing finished in Queensland more than 100 years ago. It stopped in WA in 1941 and in NSW in 1997. Tasmania joined their ranks in 2007.

A Senate committee in 1991 suggested it be phased out across Australia over a three-year period and, in 2010, this is exactly where things were headed for Victoria – until the state election prompted local MP Dr Denis Napthine to [pledge \\$2 million to assist the racing industry](#) if the Coalition won office.

The Coalition won and Dr Napthine, who part-owns a racehorse with local Federal MP Dan Tehan*, would be not only the

Minister for Racing but also, eventually, Premier. Talk about friends in high places.

Despite the \$2 million having surely being spent by now, horses still die in jumps racing.

It is a nasty, unavoidable truth of the “sport”, even if we try and disguise it behind the green curtain that is hastily erected around the broken horses before they are euthanased on the track.

According to the RSPCA, four horses died in jumps racing last year and there is no doubt that this week, many punters will be watching the three main jumps events at Warrnambool with their hearts in their mouths, hoping all the horses (and riders) make it home, while feeling a deep sense of unease that the horses are being made to perform this way in the first place.



Spin the Bottle, part-owned by Premier Dr Denis Napthine and local Federal MP Dan Tehan. He is not a jumps racer.

The Warrnambool Grand Annual Steeplechase is 5.5 kilometres

long – the Melbourne Cup is 2km shorter – and includes 33 jumps: the most of any steeplechase event anywhere in the world. That is a lot of running and a heck of a lot of jumping, even for a horse that “enjoys” it.

And for all of their Herculean efforts, hardly anyone remembers who wins. Can you name one winner of the Grand Annual Steeplechase? Or the Brierly Steeplechase? Or the Galleywood Hurdle?

At the end of the day, it all seems so cruel and so unnecessary, especially when such a small group of people has any significant investment in jumps racing and its immediate spoils.

The average punter, I believe, would be just as happy to go along to a three-day racing carnival at the beautiful Warrnambool racecourse and *not* see horses jump.

Some of the most popular – and charming – race carnivals in Victoria (think Dunkeld, Hanging Rock) attract thousands of people not because of the actual racing, but because of the atmosphere, and the chance to dress up and drink champagne for brunch.

Given the increasing awareness and activism around animal rights, especially among young people, it is only a matter of time until jumps racing is banned across Australia.

So why not cancel the jumps at Warrnambool, just for a year? Or maybe for three years, as happened during World War II when the Grand Annual Steeplechase was suspended because of more pressing matters than horse racing.

Then will we know whether the May Racing Carnival can truly stand on its own two legs, rather than relying on horses to stand on all four: despite all that is thrown at them.

*Since writing this piece, [The Age has questioned the](#)

[connections](#) between Dr Naphthine and Midfield Meats managing director Colin McKenna, another part-owner of Spin the Bottle.



Wouldn't punters be just as happy wearing fancy clothes and sipping champagne trackside without the need for jumps racing?