

Veil of secrecy over salary of the WCC's top job

Analysis: The veil of secrecy over the salary package of WCC chief.

Fun4Kids: the missing bits



OPINION

When the Warrnambool City Council gathers tonight (3/11) for its monthly public meeting, there will be one item missing from the agenda: the full picture of the parlous state of the Fun4Kids festival, as outlined to councillors a fortnight ago.

For some strange reason, this report – unlike others – did not make the cut and will not be released to the public until at

least December, despite the future of the festival being the topic of the moment.

But the full report provides some fascinating details, such as the fact that there is, as yet, nobody to run the 2015 festival.

[As you now know, the eight-day festival](#) – whether you love it, don't like it, or are not-fussed either way – posted a record loss in 2014 which requires \$593,000 of council funds to cover, or around \$150,000 more than anticipated.

It also posted a record low attendance of just 19,758. By way of contrast, in 2005, the event attracted 32,112 people.



Mayor Michael Neoh remains confident that the fading Fun4Kids festival can be turned around in six months. Image: ABC

Fun4Kids is dying, and has been for some years, but several

councillors and **Mayor Michael Neoh** remain confident that they can turn things around in just six months and will spend at least another \$450,000 to do so.

This means that the total ratepayer subsidy since the festival began is closing in on \$7 million.

Let me say that again: **\$7 million**.

It has already been pointed out by **Cr Peter Hulin** that if Fun4Kids was producing such a stimulus to the local economy, why are there so many empty shops in the heart of Warrnambool?

And isn't it just a little strange to spend \$450,000 on Fun4Kids to stimulate the local economy while also asking traders to pay a compulsory levy to raise \$300,000 to stimulate the local economy? (In a neat piece of synchronicity, [objections to this levy close today](#)).

And why can't the council afford to offer 8 weeks of free summer car parking in the CBD to try and make visitors linger longer – at a cost of \$100,000 – yet it can fund 8 days of Fun4Kids for \$593,000?



None of it makes sense, and it makes less sense when you see the full details of the Fun4Kids briefing provided to

councillors on October 20.

While we wait for the official release, here is a summary in dot points:

- * As it stands, there is nobody to run the Fun4Kids festival. Both the Service Manager (Events and Promotion) and the Marketing Manager have resigned from their roles. Both positions have been advertised, but not filled. Another part-time staff member will be taking maternity leave in December.
- * There has been “an erosion” in sponsorship and in-kind support for the festival, but the 2014 event still secured \$646,250 of in-kind support. (Imagine the cost to ratepayers without it!)
- * Ticket sale revenue has dropped 30% from 2012 to 2014 (\$505,381 to \$372,479).
- * Locals are abandoning the festival. Of the 19,758 people who came to the 2014 festival, 9100 were from Warrnambool, compared to 13,812 in 2013. This is despite heavily discounted ticket prices for locals in the final days of the event.
- * Less people are coming from Melbourne: 3965 in 2014 compared to 5590 in 2013.
- * Council staff met with a lot of groups after the 2014 Fun4Kids festival to discuss the disappointing results: these groups included Sovereign Hill, Great Ocean Road Tourism, Federation Square and Melbourne Major Events. These groups highlighted a lack of local support and the increased competition in children’s entertainment as significant issues.



Given all of the above, it is not surprising that council staff recommended Fun4Kids not continue in 2015.

This is the nub of what they said to councillors on October 20:

"Despite the positive feedback and suggested recommendations, Council officers are not confident, given the above findings, the financial results of the festival, the loss of events and promotions capability within the organisation, and the overall increases in the costs of running the festival, that it would be possible to attract back the levels of audience participation that the festival needs to meet its financial targets."

They then went on to recommend that community groups, traders and tourism bodies be told as soon as possible that the event was ending, and that council develop an "events strategy" to build on the city's strengths and attract tourists all-year round.

But we know what happened: the advice was dismissed and the council now has six months to pull off a miracle turn-around.

While nobody wants to be the person who closes down Peppa Pig, it takes true grit and leadership to admit that the event has had its day and another \$450,000 could be better used on developing a fresh attraction.

Grappling with the work of a predator



The impromptu mural by Rolf Harris in the loading dock at Lighthouse Theatre – it has since been covered by perspex. Image: ABC Radio South-west Victoria – Jeremy Lee.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

[box] A warning: this piece contains details of Rolf Harris's crimes which some readers may find distressing.[/box]

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t is more than two months since the Warrnambool City Council promised [a discussion about the future](#) of the Rolf Harris mural in light of his convictions for molesting children but, until now, we have not heard a word.

As readers will recall, an impromptu mural by Harris in the

loading dock of the Lighthouse Theatre was covered by painted perspex after he was convicted on 12 counts of sexually abusing four girls aged between eight and 19, with the community split over whether the work should be retained or painted over.

Mayor Michael Neoh, at that time, said there was no room for a “knee jerk reaction” and the future of the work needed a considered response – perhaps it would be reinterpreted by adding a white ribbon over the perspex or some other symbol of denouncing violence against women. (Except Harris’s crimes were not about women, they were about sexually abusing children.)

Then the discussion fell quiet as if, by keeping the mural out of sight and out of mind, we might all just forget about it.

But survivors of child sexual abuse never forget, and neither do we.



Mayor Michael Neoh. Image: ABC.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]W [/dropcap]hen *Bluestone* emailed each councillor for an update on their personal view about the mural, Mayor Neoh initially sounded annoyed that he was being pressed to “act in haste”.

“Council will discuss the matter as a group. I would respectfully say that it is appropriate to address issues in a considered manner and not to not act in haste to meet external deadlines,” he wrote.

When asked what deadlines he was talking about, Mayor Neoh replied:

“As you would be aware the painting has been fully covered and we were awaiting for any indication of an appeal processes which seems unlikely now. The acting (Chief Executive) and I recently discussed raising it in a future briefing and I assume it will be an item, like many others, on a briefing agenda in the near future.”

So does Mayor Neoh still want the mural retained or not? We don't know.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]O [/dropcap]ur view on the mural is unequivocal – it should already be gone and you can read our reasoning in [our earlier opinion piece](#) – but the councillors are divided.

The [full responses from councillors can be found here](#), but, in summary: **Cr Kylie Gaston** and **Cr Peter Sycopoulis** said they wanted the work retained – but covered – and with some form of educational message added, such as the white ribbon symbol or an explanatory plaque.

Cr Peter Hulin said that unless Harris successfully appealed his conviction (which appears unlikely), the mural should be painted over. While **Cr Jacinta Ermacora** said there was no right answer, she believed the fate of the mural should be decided by the community and “relevant stakeholders”. “I

believe that the voices of victims ought be given significant weight in this matter," she said.*

We did not receive a response from **Cr Brian Kelson** or **Cr Rob Askew**.



Rolf Harris was earlier this year convicted on 12 counts of sexual offences against children. Image: The Guardian

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] W [dropcap]hat I wonder is this:

Would the council still be tip-toeing around this issue if the mural had been painted by a Warrnambool man who had since been found guilty of the same crimes as Rolf Harris?

[learn_more caption="You can read details here: contains explicit content"]Harris's crimes include touching an eight year old girl's vagina, digitally penetrating a 15 year old girl on multiple occasions, and licking the vagina of a 15 year old girl while she was asleep and her parents, whom Harris had been visiting, were downstairs.[/learn_more]

These are among the crimes which the judge outlined in his sentencing of Harris and they need to be named up. ([You can read the full remarks here](#)).

The celebrity status that Harris used to cover up his crimes (including in 1986, when he painted the Warrnambool mural), is the very same status that is protecting him now.

We don't need white ribbons and plaques and educational reinterpretations to remind us that this man is a predator and, to this day, has shown no remorse: he typifies so many sexual abusers, including those who still walk free in our community.

"But it is *art*", is the most common response from those who find it impossible to accept that this mural must go.

It is a *painting*, to be sure, but in my mind not all art is created equal.



Melbourne paint shop owner Frank Penhalluriack took one of the "most important stands" of his life in rolling over a Rolf Harris mural after the artist's conviction. Image: Herald-Sun

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]P[/dropcap]ublic murals, by their sheer nature, are transitory: they fade, they are painted over, they are removed.

We know this because about 12 years after Harris spontaneously created his mural from an errant paint splodge, another commissioned mural less than 400m away was bulldozed to make way for a string of soul-less apartments in the Ozone carpark without so much as a whimper.

This was a work by local indigenous artist **Fiona Clarke**.

Harris's work will remain in dozens, if not hundreds, of private art collections around the world – he was nothing if not prolific – and had this mural been treated the same way as Fiona Clarke's when the Lighthouse Theatre was upgraded, it would already be gone. (Apparently the plans were modified to accommodate the mural, such is the power of celebrity.)

If only we, as a city, had the courage and fortitude of **Frank Penhalluriack**, the Melbourne [paint shop owner](#) who, the moment Harris was found guilty, rolled a bright-red roller over an impromptu Harris mural painted in his shop in 1990.

"It is one of the most important stands I have ever taken," he told the Herald Sun.

I wonder how many of us – and our city councillors – could say the same thing?

* Since being contacted by *Bluestone*, Cr Ermacora raised the issue at last week's council briefing, which is the first in a series of steps toward opening a wider community discussion.

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Trader levy deal...and the Jennifer Lowe factor



The controversial Warrnambool traders levy is set to be revised and relaunched in late September as a compromise.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [/dropcap]s the proposed Warrnambool traders levy rolls into another month without a resolution between the two sides, there is a burning question that remains unanswered: why is the council persisting with it?

Bluestone has been looking for clues.

As we know, [more than 100 angry traders](#) crammed into the **Warrnambool City Council** chambers for its last meeting and demanded that it quash moves to raise \$3 million over five years for **Commerce Warrnambool** via a compulsory levy on businesses.

Despite this show of dissatisfaction, Mayor Michael Neoh used his casting vote to give Commerce Warrnambool more time – until the end of September – to try and negotiate a deal with traders.

What this means is that, behind the scenes, the push is on to split the levy between traders and the council and call it a “compromise”.

[As we wrote last month](#), instead of traders paying the full \$600,000 a year, they will be asked to pay less – say, \$450,000 – and the council will chip in the remaining \$150,000 because it has decided it really wants to help Commerce Warrnambool along.

The council’s enthusiasm is where we have our first clue about what we believe is really going on.

It is a rare day that the council finds a group that is willing to tax its own members to pay for things that the council should be doing, ie. supporting businesses and promoting the city.

If this \$3 million fund goes ahead, the council can justifiably shift the bulk of the cost (and responsibility) of

marketing, promotions and supporting businesses on to Commerce Warrnambool and have the traders fund it.

Initially, the council thought it would not have to pay a cent (more about that in a moment), but even if it contributes \$150,000, all it needs to do is cut a couple of people from its marketing department and “voila!” it has broken even.



It's a rare day when a lobby group agrees to tax its own members to raise funds for work previously done by the council.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] F [/dropcap]or the council's beancounters, this is a sweet deal in the making, even if not quite as sweet as the traders being hit with the full \$600,000 a year, it is an excellent start.

Angry traders, of course, will be told that they can still vote “no” to stop the levy, but if the pressure on opposing traders is considerable now, I can only imagine what it will be like when they are seen to be objecting to a “compromise”.

Given the levy idea has created such a toxic split in the business community, why didn't Commerce Warrnambool just ask the council for \$150,000 in the first place and start small? Well, it did.

Bluestone has learned that since Commerce Warrnambool began in 2010, it has approached the council many times to see if it would provide seed funding (something like \$80,000-\$100,000 a year for three years) until it found its feet and became financially independent.

At that time, Commerce Warrnambool was primarily a business advocacy, network and support group, which is what chambers of commerce are all about, rather than focussing on the much larger role of promoting and marketing the whole city.

It was knocked back each time.

So what has changed?

We believe the clues lie in a series of events late last year.



Former outspoken
Warrnambool City Councillor
Jennifer Lowe, who was a
key player in Commerce
Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] B [/dropcap] that time, Commerce Warrnambool had in its hands a proposal prepared by consultants **Peter McNabb and Associates** which, in the face of the council's persistent knock backs, detailed how a business levy could not only fund its activities, but widen them substantially.

The business levy would not be a seed fund for Commerce Warrnambool until it attracted memberships and corporate sponsorships, but virtually its *entire* fund. Its budget would no longer be around \$300,000 over three years, but \$3 million over five years.

Some (but not all) members of Commerce Warrnambool got very excited and *now* the council was also listening – for the cost-saving reasons mentioned earlier. But there was still a sticking point.

Commerce Warrnambool, at that time, was still operating under its original board of management including secretary **Jennifer Lowe**.

It's no secret to those who have watched the council for a long time that Ms Lowe, who is a former city councillor, was not universally embraced by fellow councillors and council staff during her term (that ended in 2012) because of her outspoken stand on many issues.

Imagine if Commerce Warrnambool learned that the council liked its big, bold levy idea to raise \$3 million from traders, but it didn't like Ms Lowe holding a key role in an

organisation that was set to become much more influential. The money, or the secretary?

Whatever the scenario, Ms Lowe [suddenly stepped down](#) in late November, together with two other founding board members in **Darren Harris** and **Peter Watson**.

From there, the levy proposal was rolled out in something of a rush.

Within a few months, a new Commerce Warrnambool board of management was elected – with **Tony Herbert** replacing **Richard Montgomery** as president – a business plan went to council, the levy was ticked off at its May meeting, the public notices were being prepared...and then an increasing number of traders realised that they would have to pay for it and the wheels began to fall off.

As it stands, the traders are [holding off on their threatened legal action](#) pending more discussions which may or may not see Ms Lowe back at the negotiating table.

It is understood that, privately, she has made her feelings about the levy debacle well known to her Commerce Warrnambool colleagues, but is also among those keen to see the impasse resolved.

Whether somebody left outside the tent can now clean up the mess within it, remains to be seen.

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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.

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