

Close Flagstaff Hill; save Fletcher Jones

If there is one thing Warrnambool needs to get right, it is the preservation of Pleasant Hill and the Fletcher Jones site...so why are we spending so much time, money and effort on Flagstaff Hill instead?

Sister cities or business brothers?



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] A
[/dropcap]mid all the [arguing](#) about whether Warrnambool City

Council should send a delegation to Miura, Japan, for Sister City celebrations, a simple question is yet to be answered: what do we gain from our two Sister City connections?

And, more importantly, what do we expect?

Trying to answer the first question is harder than you think, as there is no single, easily accessible reporting mechanism that documents the achievements of the Miura link that dates back more than 20 years (our Sister City link with Changchun, China, began last year).

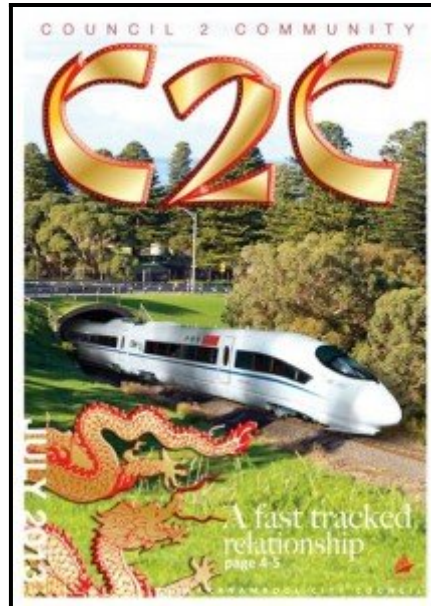
Instead, you have to trawl through two decades of council minutes and newspaper archives to discover that our Sister City relationship with Miura has pretty much done what it set out to do, which was to build “friendship, cooperation and understanding” between two very different cultures.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] I
[/dropcap]n a pre-Internet world, it was considered money well spent to invest ratepayer dollars in building harmonious relationships with cultures so unlike our own as to be exotic. School kids have a chance to visit another country, and to host international students in return. We have a lovely, if hidden, Japanese friendship garden, and Miura has some Norfolk pine seedlings. Funds have been used to host and attend civic functions, both here and in Miura.

That’s what a Sister City relationship used to be about and what ratepayers’ money has been spent on, although whether – in the wired, highly mobile world of 2013 – it is still money well spent, is open to debate.

Which brings us to the second question: what do we expect?

This is where things have shifted.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] T
[/dropcap]he July edition of the Council's newsletter, [C2C](#), was almost breathless in its description of our newest Sister City, Changchun, as a place of 7.5 million people, spread across 20,571sq/km, and pumping out 2.8 million and 2500 train carriages a year. Who wouldn't want a piece of that action?

Indeed, the newsletter cover gave a tantalising taste of what we might look forward to, with a mock image of a Chinese bullet train speeding into Warrnambool railway station. Wow, this would be so much better than the current V-Line service that is one of the [poorest performing in the state](#) because of its breakdowns and delays.

This new Sister City relationship is not only about friendship and goodwill, but promoting "common prosperity and development" – in other words, business – and this takes a lot of time, and we can expect, a lot more money before we see any concrete results.

The council minutes of September 9 make this clear:

"If the Council and the Great South Coast elect to use the relationship with Changchun to leverage business

opportunities, further costs will accrue in hosting visits to Warrnambool from Changchun and staff resources in preparing and supporting business and projects to the benefit of the region, matching funding with state government grants etc. These are unknown at this stage.”



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] W [/dropcap]hile we might be flattered by the intentions of a major city, we certainly don't have Changchun all to ourselves. Changchun has 19 other Sister Cities: Warrnambool is number 20. In this regard, it is a bit like being married to a polygamist – you have a seat at the table, but the love is being shared around.

Still, the [recent business delegation to Changchun](#), led by Mayor Michael Neoh and CEO Bruce Anson, reported that they found the trip invaluable as an entrée to potential new markets.

No doubt their efforts to build on this introduction will dovetail with the work of the Great South Coast Exporters Group, and similar state and federal bodies that work to build international trade relations.

But is this what our Sister City relationships should be about?

And should ratepayers' money be directed to this purpose, or could it be better used to fund, for example, more tangible and immediate projects such as improving the restaurant end of Liebig St, installing more public art, or buying more books for the library?

The little sister has grown up: now is the time for an open discussion on where she fits into the family.



If you enjoyed this, you might enjoy...

[When scrutiny is sub-standard, democracy suffers](#)

When scrutiny is sub-standard, democracy suffers



Image: The Florida Times-Union.

Something very troubling is happening in our community when it comes to the local media's scrutiny of those in power.

Since returning to Warrnambool in January, I have watched with growing disbelief at the apparent reticence of our once-proud local newspaper, The Standard, to go in hard and ask the tough questions of our leaders.

This is what journalists do. This is the role of the so-called 'Fourth Estate' – to be the watchdog of the powerful and give voice to the powerless.

It is an essential part of our democracy and ensures that we retain an open, transparent and accountable government – on all levels.



This past week, we saw national scrutiny of MPs' spending, sparked by revelations that Prime Minister Abbott had claimed allowances for trips to weddings, triathlons and cycling events.

Was our local federal MP **Dan Tehan** asked by our paper to detail the \$873,992.35 that he spent from 2010-12? No, instead this figure was not even mentioned, but rather [the paper's story \(10/10\)](#) reassured us that he had claimed \$321,000 in 'legitimate government entitlements'. End of story.

There is no suggestion that Mr Tehan used his allowance improperly, but nor is it improper for a journalist to forensically examine this spending. This is exactly what independent journalist **Margot Kingston** did when she [broke the story](#) about Tony Abbott claiming more than \$9000 in taxpayer funds to promote his book.

It is only by drilling down into the detail that all the facts can come to light.



Mayor Michael
Neoh. Image: ABC.

Earlier this year, Warrnambool Mayor **Michael Neoh** visited China as part of a Sister City relationship with Changchun. Shortly after his return, [The Standard ran a story \(29/6\)](#) about Mr Neoh visiting his ancestral home in China and catching up with relatives.

Was this part of the official tour for which ratepayers paid \$3500 for both Mr Neoh and Council CEO **Bruce Anson**?

Did Mr Neoh pay for this portion of the trip himself? Again, there is no suggestion of impropriety by Mr Neoh, but we don't know the answer to these questions because, it appears, they weren't asked.*

And when others *do* ask the prickly, difficult questions, the response is sometimes extraordinary.

Last month, **Cr Peter Sycopoulis** and several council colleagues questioned whether Mayor Neoh and Mr Anson needed to attend a Sister City function in Japan – expected to cost ratepayers \$4000 – given they had just been to China.

For this, the councillors were chastised by the newspaper as [being 'party poopers'](#) (11/11). What?

And let's not forget the infamous '[Wilma Wright' letters to the editor](#)'. These were published by The Standard for four years – four years – without anybody apparently checking the identity of the author, who was revealed as Mr Anson's son and who at one point used the cover of his pseudonym to openly attack several councillors, including Cr Sycopoulis, in the lead up to a council election.

(Mr Anson, it must be noted, was cleared of any involvement in his son's activities).



Cr Peter Sycopoulis

The names in this column – Mr Tehan, Mayor Neoh, Mr Anson – are irrelevant: it is the public, important positions that they hold that makes them open to scrutiny and a higher standard of accountability.

This is the hard work of journalism.

It is much harder, more time consuming and nerve-wrecking than writing story after story about courts and crime (ie. the powerless) where all of the leg work has been done, yet it is critical if we are to have faith in our media as the watchdog it is intended to be.

If it fails in this task, it is nothing less than our democracy which suffers.

* *The Warrnambool City Council has since confirmed to Bluestone that Mayor Neoh did fund this portion of his travel.*

Disclosures:

- I began my journalism career as a cadet at The Standard in 1989.
- I was an open supporter of ALP candidate Michael Barling during the last federal election because I thought he was the best option for Wannon. It was the first time I voted Labor in many years: I normally vote Green.
- I know Cr Sycopoulis through his family: his older sisters and I went to school together.

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Windy? Make the most of it!

“My friend the wind will come from the hills When dawn will rise, he’ll wake me again My friend the wind will tell me a secret He shares with me, he shares with me...” Growing up in Warrnambool, we had...

Why not...spruce up the whale zone?



[box] This section – why not? – is a place to consider ideas: no matter how small, large or outrageous.[/box]

This week: Why not spruce up the whale zone at Logan's Beach, Warrnambool?

The fact Warrnambool has a whale nursery right on its doorstep is truly remarkable.

People travel for miles to Warrnambool to see these beautiful creatures in the wild, doing wild things, without the need for anyone to pay an admission ticket, to stand in a queue or be bombarded by people selling tacky souvenirs.

Instead, it is a simple, pure experience to stand high on a headland and watch up to 16 Southern Right whales – 16 ! – swimming in the water below.

But on land, things are starting to look a little shabby.

The sign to the main turnoff to the whales is rusted and faded and the interpretive signs on the whale viewing platform are similarly showing the signs of long exposure to salt air. Both could do with a makeover.

And while we're at it, why not ban smoking on the whale platform itself? We asked the Warrnambool City Council about this, but their response indicated that it would involve a complicated, convoluted process that seems to accompany most decisions by councils.

Why not just do it?