

Fun4Kids faces axe after cost blow-out



Opinion – Carol Altmann

The 2014 Fun4Kids festival is expected to show a record loss of up to \$600,000, prompting a recommendation from Warrnambool City Council staff that it be axed in 2015.

Bluestone believes that the figures – due to be released by the council early next month – will confirm that the cost to ratepayers to subsidise the annual, eight-day festival has quadrupled in less than 10 years.

As a result, it is understood that council staff have taken a 360-degree turn from last December, when it was recommended the 14-year-old festival be funded for another three years at a cost of up to \$450,000 a year, to recommending it be closed.

The total subsidy for the festival since it started in 1999 is now in excess of \$6 million with, as some councillors have argued, not a lot to show for it.

As it happens, in anticipation of the 2014 figures being released, I had already spent some time crunching the numbers from Fun4Kids in 2005 – which was a good year – compared to 2013, and this is how they stacked up:

[box]Total cost of the event:

2005: \$672,223

2013: \$1,082,070 (up 60%)

Total revenue from the event:

2005: \$523,115

2013: \$614, 242 (up 17%)

Council subsidy for the event:

2005: \$156,354

2013: \$467,827 (almost tripled)[/box]

As you can see, even before the release of the 2014 figures, the public subsidy for the event has almost tripled and is about to get a whole lot worse.



Before I am accused of attacking an event that is designed for kids, it is worth remembering the Warrnambool City Council's own aims when Fun4Kids first started in 1999.

At that time, the idea was for the festival to break-even or be “cost neutral” within a few years.

By 2003 – four years on – the council was told by external consultants that this was still unrealistic and that, “for the next few years at least”, it would need to spend around \$100,000 a year on helping Fun4Kids to meet its expenses.

Any thoughts of even trying to break even have since been forgotten and, each year, the event has become much more expensive to run.

This might not be such an issue if Fun4Kids was drawing record crowds, but less people are showing up.

In 2005, attendances were at 32,112. By 2009, this had fallen to 24,349 and by 2013, it was down to 22,217 people, or a third less than the 2005 numbers.

It appears the numbers for 2014 will be even worse, despite ticket giveaways and drastically reduced ticket prices for locals in the final days of the event.



One of the biggest costs has been in paying performers, as the festival has sought to attract more high-profile artists: the performance costs were \$69,970 in 2005 and \$220,000 in 2013. Talent does not come cheap.

When I asked the council last week about the rising cost of running the event, its spokesman replied:

“The increase in the cost of Fun4Kids from 2005 is largely explained through a changed accounting methodology which included the cost of staff salaries (the time commitment of

events staff into the project) and inflation.”

But internal council staffing costs of around \$82,000 were included in the 2005 total and inflation has been low for the past decade: around 3 per cent.

On any measure, Fun4Kids cannot be deemed a financial success for the council, but it has previously justified its subsidy on the wider spin-offs for the city, and there is no doubt tourism operators and a few local businesses see Fun4Kids as a boost in what can be quiet months of the year.

Again, however, the wider spin-offs for Warrnambool have not grown in step with the rising cost.



According to the 2005 figures, the wider economic benefit from Fun4Kids was estimated at around \$4.5 million. By 2013, this had not grown, but *fallen* to \$3.69 million.

The more direct economic impact (using a different formula, based on actual spending), was set at \$1.51 million in 2005 and had climbed to \$1.94 million in 2013, which is a slight, but not significant, improvement after eight years.

Of course there are lots of immeasurables around an event such as Fun4Kids, including providing a fun event for young families, and encouraging those tourists who do attend to visit Warrnambool again.

The event has also been recognised in the past with tourism awards and, no doubt, adds to the number of “things to do” in Warrnambool during the off-season.

But it was never set up to be a loss-making exercise and I wondered when it was decided to reposition Fun4Kids from becoming “cost neutral” to heavily subsidised.

I emailed this question to the council’s media and communications manager to see if he could flush out the history.

“Council makes a decision annually on the festival, including decisions relating to its budget,” was the reply.

While the subsidies are not quite on the scale of a Melbourne Formula One Grand Prix, the question needs to be asked as to what a regional council is doing in the business of commercial event management, especially when the event is losing its lustre?

And would any other publicly funded event in Warrnambool, such as Wunta, be given as much financial leeway as Fun4Kids before it was reigned in?

Irrespective of your attitude about Fun4Kids, I believe these are legitimate questions to ask of those in charge of spending your money and more people, no doubt, will be asking the same questions when the 2014 losses officially come to light.

[box] Sources used for this piece include: WCC agenda 10.5.05; Auditor-General Victoria report, *Results of Special Reviews and other Investigations*, May 2005; WCC Budget 2004-05; Fun4Kids Service Review, WCC minutes 9 Dec, 2013.[/box]

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The 'mystery man' behind \$20m apartment plan

EXCLUSIVE: We reveal the 'mystery man' behind the \$20 million apartment complex proposal for Warrnambool...

All words, no funding, for the Fletcher Jones story



Just like old times: the Fletcher Jones gardens came to life at the recent spring picnic, under the watchful

eye of the silver ball. The next challenge is to preserve the Fletcher Jones stories.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

If there was any doubt as to how much the Fletcher Jones Pleasant Hill site in Warrnambool means to locals, the recent spring picnic has laid it to rest.

Around 1500 people flocked to the gardens last weekend to wander among the market stalls, listen to the music, stretch out on the grass and – like so many thousands of children and adults before them – take pleasure in the many garden delights that Sir Fletcher Jones created in his factory grounds.

Cr Jacinta Ermacora has leapt on this huge wave of support [to announce today in the local newspaper](#) that she thought it was “time to tell the Fletcher Jones story”, and a meeting would be held shortly between all of the interested parties to work out how this could be done.

What Cr Ermacora failed to mention, or was not reported, was that the council was first asked to collect these stories way back in 2002, when it was a key recommendation in a report it [commissioned](#) into the future of the Fletcher Jones site.

What has been done by anyone on the council since then?

Absolutely nothing.



Thousands of stories make up the fabric of the Fletcher Jones story, which is still yet to be documented from a social history perspective. Image: Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens Facebook page.

There is also a vast amount of precious Fletcher Jones memorabilia cast about Warrnambool, with some in History House, some at The Artery, and some in people's private homes, that needs to be collated, assessed and preserved for future installations.

What has any council member done about that so far?

Absolutely nothing.

In the interim, as people age, and pass away, the stories are being lost and the memorabilia is getting harder to trace (and let's not forget that many items ended up in a skip bin when the site was first sold by the council in 2005, only to be retrieved by artists).

This is why a small group of people, led by **Julie Eagles** from

the Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group, has been asking the council for *months* whether there is any funding set aside in this year's budget to at least start the process of gathering these stories.

It was hard to get a clear reply.

Bluestone got a reply on Thursday and this is it in full:

"We have no funding specifically allocated to telling the story of Fletcher Jones in this year's budget.

However, the history of Fletcher Jones and other elements that tell the story of Warrnambool will be on the table when the time comes to look at public art as part of the city centre renewal.

Once we have the foundation stage of the renewal plan completed – which addresses issues including accessibility and mobility – we'll be engaging the community in a discussion on public art." – Nick Higgins, Manager Communications.

So how much funding is there for the Fletcher Jones story project?

Absolutely nothing.



The stories behind
working for Fletcher

Jones are yet to be captured.

By contrast, Melbourne University has already started work on collating and recording the business story behind Fletcher Jones and **Melinda Barrie**, [from this project](#), has shown a willingness to work with local groups to capture the local stories.

It is embarrassing, to say the least, that a Melbourne institution has been more motivated and excited by our local, contemporary history than our own council.

And by contrast to the council's inertia on what we might call the whole Fletcher Jones package – the stories, the site, the potential – last Sunday's picnic was a triumph of what can be done through hard work, passion and belief.

Not only did it showcase the magnificent efforts of resident gardener **Lex Caldwell** and his team of volunteers who have kept the gardens alive, but it was a celebration for all those other volunteers who believed that the best parts of this iconic site were worth saving.

Those who pressed hardest to keep Pleasant Hill on the public radar – Julie Eagles, The F Project arts collective, us here at *Bluestone Magazine*, and the consequent [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens Facebook page](#) started by **Tonia Wilcox** – all did so without any official backing.



The annual Christmas party picnic was a highlight of the Fletcher Jones calendar. Plans are afoot to bring them back again, albeit in a revised version. Image: Courtesy of Lost Warrnambool.

Similarly, the spring picnic was organised within weeks by The F Project/The Artery without a cent of funding and relied heavily on volunteers who pulled it all together – people like Dr Emma Charlton, Megan Nicolson, Des and Helen Bunyon, Ruby Richardson, Danielle O'Brien, the Factory Arts crew, Julie Eagles – the same names that keep coming up time after time and who continue to make exciting things happen around the city.

They don't sit around waiting for others to do something: they just get on with it.

The F Project, for its efforts, made less than \$400 on the day from a raffle, but it was never about raising money. It was all about bringing life back to the gardens through the arts, but you can't keep expecting volunteers to do all the heavy lifting.

And so it is with the capturing of the Fletcher Jones stories.

The funding is there: it's just how the council chooses to spend it.

It recently found [\\$10,000 on short notice](#) for the Oddball movie, and [another \\$3 million](#) of state and council funds are about to be plunged into sound and light shows at Flagstaff Hill.

So unless Cr Ermacora can come to the meeting armed with a firm proposal for council funding, it is nothing more than hollow words on the back of very successful picnic and that – unlike a pair of Fletcher Jones' scissors on the factory floor – just won't cut it.

**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 leaders 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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Trader levy halved – a victory for voices



Commerce Warrnambool has heavily revised its plans for a compulsory levy to try and lure shoppers back to the CBD, but will its ideas win over traders? Image: Soul Shopping.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t has been a long and often heated battle, but the proposed compulsory traders levy to raise funds for **Commerce Warrnambool** is now

fully transparent and more realistic in its aims – purely through the power of grassroots action.

In a revised motion to go to the Warrnambool City Council on Monday (Sept 1), the annual levy – which will operate for five years – has been halved from \$600,000 to \$300,000 and no trader, be they commercial or industrial, will be asked to pay more than \$300 per year, compared to up to \$6000 in the initial plan.

[Commerce Warrnambool](#) President Tony Herbert had hoped the council might kick in the remaining \$300,000 from general revenue, but this has not happened. Instead, Commerce Warrnambool has gone through its budget and emerged with a more modest plan to promote and market Warrnambool.

For starters, the budget for a full-time executive officer, support staff and other management and communication costs has been cut from an initial \$200,000 to \$95,000, with a suggestion that the executive officer could be either full or part time.

This does away with concerns that the levy would do little more than pay for the salary of someone sitting behind a desk, enjoying a very nice job for the next five years.

Advertising has been cut from \$120,000 a year to \$75,000 and plans to take on the [Warrnambool Business Awards](#) and attend the [Regional Living Expo](#) – both of which are currently handled by the council – have been scrapped.



The promotions may not be simple as this one, but Commerce Warrnambool has outlined its plan in more detail. Image: Unknown/Facebook

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I
[dropcap]mportantly, Commerce Warrnambool has also set down – for the first time – very clear projects that will be funded by the levy.

They include three promotional activities in the first year for a total cost of \$80,000: a shop local car giveaway; a spring produce promotion and a Christmas promotion.

It also includes projects for business support, education and networking: four professional development workshops (total cost \$20,000) and four networking activities (again \$20,000).

The strange idea of raising \$100,000 each year toward “an infrastructure project” has also vanished, thank goodness,

because this was fraught with difficulties around who would decide what project was worthy and how it would be chosen.

Will those traders who were heavily opposed to the levy warm to the revised plan?

Perhaps not – remember they never asked for a levy in the first place – but at least now there is air and light around what Commerce Warrnambool will do with the funds. This is far better than its “trust us” approach that came with its first plan that asked for \$3 million over five years, despite having no runs on the board in terms of delivery.



The revised levy proposal sets out a more modest budget and details how the money will be spent to promote the city of Warrnambool and support businesses.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] T [/dropcap>here is also, in the paperwork before council, a very clear process outlined for the first time as to how traders can object to the levy.

Traders no longer have to worry that they won't be notified (they will, as will landlords) or that they will miss out on

lodging an objection.

The documents tell us that, once the notification is given, they have until November 3 to make an objection or written submission (or both) and, if so inclined, can have a say at the council meeting on November 17.

See all of this information above? This is how transparency works; this is proper process, and if all of this detail had been laid out clearly from the very beginning, then perhaps the levy idea would not have fallen into a ditch.

For this we can thank the tenacious grassroots lobbyists within the [Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) for doing their bit to ensure democracy is alive and well in Warrnambool: that when it comes to public funds and accountability, everyone has a right to ask questions, no matter how prickly or how “annoying”.

This is not an easy thing to do in a regional city, where networks are tight and long in the making.

It takes great courage to risk falling out with friends, or customers, or business colleagues because you dare to challenge an idea that you are being told is “good for the city”.

For what its worth, we have had a small taste of the consequences of running against the grain here at *Bluestone*.



The packed book launch for 'Warrnambool; This is Home' at The Last Coach: an event that never happened, according to the local newspaper.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] R [/dropcap]eaders will know that, last week, I launched my small book "[Warrnambool: This is home](#)" and that this book, written before *Bluestone* began, features 30 iconic Warrnambool places and faces, including Kermonds, Mack's Snacks, the Materia Bros, Ryans Removals etc.

More than 80 people crammed into the launch at the Last Coach, including members of these wonderful Warrnambool families, but was there a word about it in the local newspaper? No, despite, ironically, two of the paper's longest-serving reporters being featured in the book.

Why was this so? Because I am part of *Bluestone Magazine*? Or because we occasionally question the newspaper? (Just as the newspaper's reporters occasionally challenge us: we consider it healthy debate). I don't know, but we find it deeply troubling that the only newspaper in a major regional city appears to have a blacklist.

This is why what the traders action group has achieved over the past six months is so important – and its impact goes well beyond what you might think of the levy.

By using grassroots activism – social media, shoe leather, door knocking, posters on windows and whatever else it takes – it has refused to be silenced and has, under considerable stress and strain, won the battle for transparency, accountability and due process.

It has shown that you can speak out, and up, and while it can be exhausting and wearing, you can be heard.

This is what makes it an important victory for us all.

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