

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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