

Warrnambool trader levy poised for defeat



The proposed compulsory trader levy for Warrnambool is set for defeat after a swell of opposition to the idea.

OPINION

A compulsory traders levy to fund Commerce Warrnambool is poised for defeat on the back of a successful grassroots campaign to knock the idea on the head.

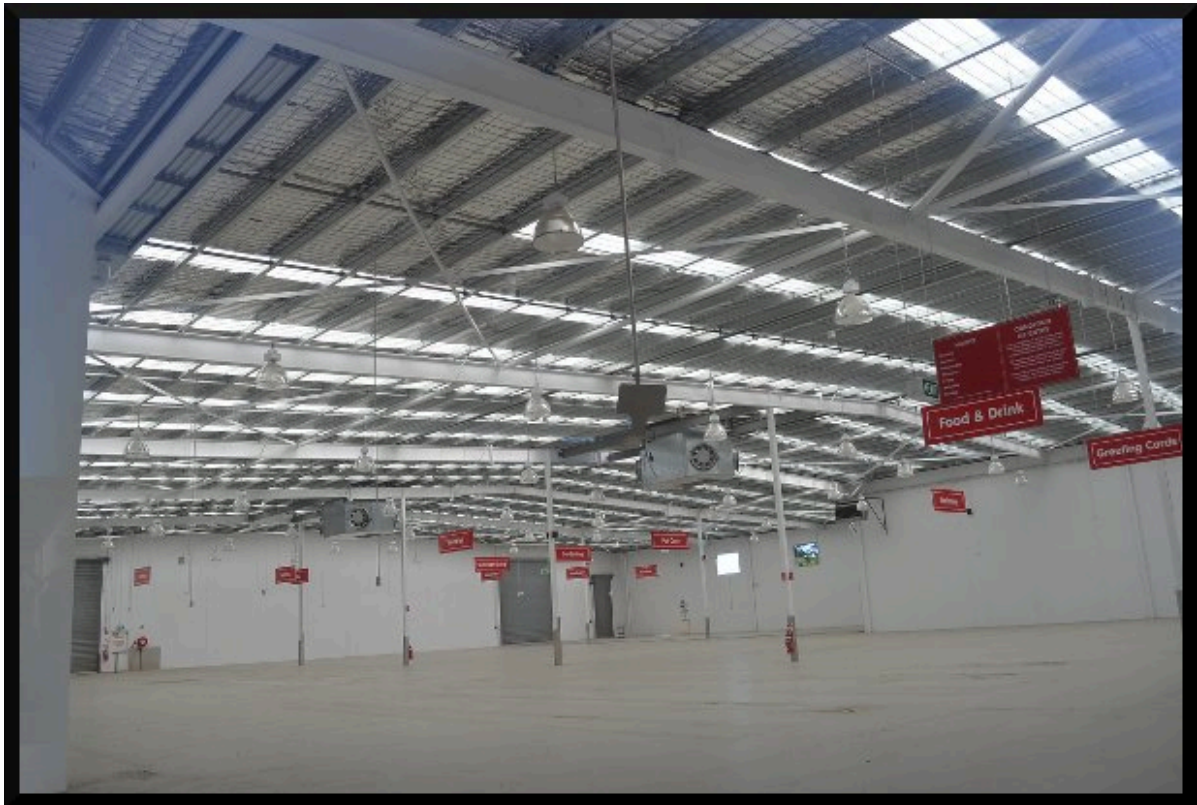
The votes have been collated by the Warrnambool City Council, and *Bluestone* understands that of the 1330 traders that would be affected by the levy, 688 – or 51.7% – took the time and effort to vote “no”.

As with any vote, not everyone filled the form out absolutely correctly, or on time, and after taking such things into account, the “no” vote settles at 49.2%.

While this brings the objections just short of an absolute majority, it would be a very brave (or foolish?) council to fly in the face of such strong opposition.

As such, it is not surprising that council staff have recommended that the levy proposal be dropped when the council meets next Monday (1/12) to vote on the issue.

In addition to a trader vote, anybody could put in a submission either for or against the levy – 36 people put in submissions against the proposal, while only five wrote in support.



Empty shops in Warrnambool's CBD are a result of a downturn that is proving hard to turn around.

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[/dropcap]his is nothing short of a crushing defeat for the levy and a remarkable result for the Facebook-based [Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) which marshalled the "no" vote.

Let's not forget that the weird voting system applied by the Local Government Act meant that only traders who *objected* to the levy had to physically vote.

Those who didn't respond were seen as being in support of the idea, even if, for example, they were interstate, sick, or may have been too busy or otherwise distracted by life events to put pen to paper.

Given this, 688 objections and 36 submissions against the levy is a huge show of dissatisfaction and an indication of how angry most traders are that the idea made it this far.

Because let's be frank, the proposal never got off to a good start.



While the levy idea was new, some of its proposed projects – like a shop local campaign – were not.

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[/dropcap]luestone readers will recall that most traders only discovered the full extent of the levy [after reading our story](#) back in May, when it was revealed that Commerce Warrnambool wanted to raise \$600,000 a year by applying a compulsory levy to all traders, including those in the industrial estate.

The levy would be in place for five years and rise by 5 per cent a year, with Commerce Warrnambool in charge of deciding how the money would be spent on promoting the city, encouraging people to shop local and lobbying on behalf of business.

Nobody doubts that local business needs a serious boost, but asking them to fund a newly formed body that had yet to demonstrate its capabilities in marketing, promotion or advocacy was ambitious, at best, and naive at worst.

[After a trader backlash](#), led by the Warrnambool Traders Action Group, the levy total was halved to \$300,000 a year and capped at \$300 a year per business.

Despite this, the proposal failed to ignite any excitement and the revised [Commerce Warrnambool business plan](#) contained very little that had not been tried before, such as shop local campaigns, Christmas decorations and car raffles.

The talk around town – and we heard it everywhere we visited – was not how great the levy idea was, but how to get rid of it.



Warrnambool still needs a wide-ranging conversation on how to revive its retail heart.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color:#A02F2F;"]G[/dropcap]iven the council has since received only five written submissions in favour of the levy, it appears that even the [12 members on the Commerce Warrnambool board](#) have not been inspired to each write a letter of support.

And so the levy will – or should – be put out of its misery on Monday.

The question now is where to from here for Warrnambool business? As we wrote last week, the [latest local business survey indicates](#) these are glum times for many businesses, which is such a contrast to what we saw when travelling through Traralgon earlier this week.

This slightly smaller city than Warrnambool was jumping: a few empty shops, yes, but still bustling.

Traralgon is the biggest city between Pakenham and Canberra and Warrnambool is the biggest city between Geelong and

Adelaide: they should both be thriving.

Could it be the free, timed parking in Traralgon that helps? Lower rents? A mix of big-name stores (Officeworks, Big W, Harvey Norman etc) and niche traders?

This is the conversation we are still yet to have.

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