

Huge apartments will set ugly precedent



The proposed nine-storey apartment complex on Gilles St/Merri St, Warrnambool, is at odds with the council's recommendation for medium density housing of no more than five storeys in this area. Image: Tract Consultants.

ANALYSIS – Carol Altmann

[box]Update: a recommendation for a permit to be issued, subject to conditions, will go before the Warrnambool City Council on Tuesday, April 7. If you wish to have a say, contact the councillors directly.[/box]

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] A quick quiz: how tall is the Warrnambool War Memorial? And how many storeys is the Lady Bay Resort?

The answers will follow shortly, but you can rest assured that neither are as high as the monolithic, nine-storey apartment complex proposed for a small, prime piece of land on the corner of Merri and Gilles streets that takes in views right across Lake Pertobe, Lady Bay, and beyond.

The \$20 million project by **Baybern Developments**, whose director is the founder of Midfield Meats, **Colin McKenna**, intends to squeeze 51 apartments – including three exclusive penthouses – into a complex that will tower almost 30m (28.6m) in to the air.

By way of contrast, the war memorial angel stands 10.9m, the townhouses opposite Cannon Hill are about 12m (three storeys) and the Lady Bay Resort, which some of us are still recovering from, is around 20m (five storeys).

This proposal, if approved, will leave them all in the shade.

And while [Tract Consultants](#)*, who are acting on behalf of Baybern, keep referring in their application to a seven-storey complex, it is quite clearly a total of nine-storeys (including two 'basement' levels), that will be hard to miss.

This is high-density housing on a scale never before seen in Warrnambool, let alone in an area that is a stone's throw from the heritage precinct of the former court house, post office and police station. Even the house right next door to the development, *Colern*, has been recommended for heritage protection.



The proposed development would transform the view approaching the war memorial angel, which stands at 10.3m compared to the 28.6m complex. Image: Tract Consultants.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T
[/dropcap]he Warrnambool City Council is acutely aware of the need to get city planning right, not just for the citizens of today, but to ensure we don't screw it up for those who will call Warrnambool home in the future.

As such, it has invested a huge amount of time, energy and money (on consultants and [in public consultation](#)) on creating a roadmap known as the *Warrnambool City Revitalisation Structure Plan 2012* which, in theory, sets out guidelines for how the city centre should develop over the next 20-25 years.

It is an inspiring document, full of wonderful images and packed with possibilities to again make the CBD the beating heart of our great, seaside city while also maintaining its unique character.

But the Warrnambool Apartments project, as it is known, is the first real test of whether this plan is worth the paper it is written on, and the signs are not encouraging.

Here are just a few examples:

Firstly, the plan recommends a limit of five storeys for this particular part of Merri St, provided it can also “suitably transition” with what is already in the area and doesn’t “prejudice the established scale and character”.

Despite this, the revised project recently submitted by Tract in response to feedback from council officers and objectors remains at nine-storeys, while also wrongly claiming that the nearby TAFE building is four storeys (it is three).

Second, the council plan lists as a key objective its support for “medium density” housing in the CBD. By its own admission, Tract describes the Warrnambool Apartments as high density.

And lastly, but no less importantly, the council plan highlights the beautiful Norfolk pines around our city centre, describing them as “iconic” and “unique”, yet the Warrnambool Apartments will involve ripping out two semi-mature Norfolk pine growing on and near the Gilles St/Merri corner. (In an Orwellian-twist, Tract promises one tree will be replaced with another Norfolk pine or a similar species.)



The revised plans reveal a different colour scheme and more detailed landscaping among the minor changes. Image: Tract Consultants.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] W [dropcap] are not privy to the discussions between Tract and the council's officers, but surely – if the council is serious about its strategic plan – it would have run a red line right through the initial proposal and sent Tract back to the drawing board.

But no. Not only did the nine-storey plan make it to first base, it has made it to second, with the revised plans showing very few, significant changes at all.

Yes, some balconies have been removed, and there has been a lightening of the colour scheme, but whether it is painted blue, grey or gold, it is still almost double the number of storeys of what should be there.

And let's be clear: the reason it has remained this way is the penthouses.

Levels 5 and 6 are "sub penthouse" levels, each of five, no-doubt-spectacular, apartments.

Level 7 – the top floor – is the cream of the crop with just three, exclusive penthouses.

So the top three levels will provide 13 dwellings for the 13 couples or individuals who can afford them, while another 38 apartments will be clustered below.

It is enough to make any council salivate – the thought of having dozens of rateable properties where previously there was only one – but this is where good planning must prevail.

Nobody is arguing against more inner-city housing, but this monumental over-development – if approved – will set a

dangerous precedent for Warrnambool that will destroy the very things the council's plan is designed to protect.

**As an aside, "tract housing" – which has nothing to do with Tract Consultants – is a style of housing known for its [cookie-cutter approach](#) in which "multiple identical or nearly-identical homes are built to create a community". It is particularly prevalent in parts of the US.*



How the development appeared in its initial plan, since revised. Image: Tract Consultants.

[box]Disclaimer: Mine is among the seven objections lodged for this proposal. References used for this piece include the planning application lodged by Tract (PP2014-0162) and the *Warrnambool City Revitalisation Structure Plan 2012* which [can be downloaded here](#). [/box]

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