

Fun4Kids Festival 2015: the results are in



Scenes from inside the 2015 Fun4Kids Festival. Image: Warrnambool City Council.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

The figures for the 2015 Fun4Kids Festival are in, and it's a case of good news and bad news for the Warrnambool City Council and, by default, its ratepayers.

The good news is that it didn't blow the bank.

In other words, it kept within the \$450,000 budget that was set aside last October and avoided anything like the \$150,000 blow-out of last year. Phew.

The bad news, however, is that the festival is attracting less people and therefore, you can assume, generating less economic and tourism benefits to Warrnambool but still costing \$450,000 to run.

While there is still no official report on the results, the council released some figures to *Bluestone* today which said

about 15,000 tickets were sold for the seven day event.

Last year, when the event ran over eight days, it attracted 19,758 people.

Of the 15,000 tickets sold this year, 24% were from metropolitan Melbourne – the highest percentage ever – which sounds like great news, until you work out that equates to only 3600 people compared to 3965 in 2015 and 5590 in 2013.

When you are coming off a smaller base, the percentages start to get wobbly.

It is extremely difficult to run a critical eye over a children's festival – after all, it is aimed at children for god's sake – but someone also needs to be the kid in the crowd as the Emperor marches by and point out that he is wearing no clothes.

So *Bluestone*, at risk of being deemed “too negative”, is prepared to say that the Fun4Kids Festival is getting precariously close to being bare-butt naked.

The reason is that the festival is no longer what it was designed to be, which was a major tourism attraction for Warrnambool.

Indeed in its heyday, the festival was pulling crowds of more than 32,000 people: double what it now achieves.

It was also costing less – far less – and at one point it was thought the council may not need to subsidise it at all because it would cover all of its own expenses. Such a notion now seems fanciful.

Here is the critical stat: in 2005, not long after the festival first began, it cost the council \$156,354 and attracted 32,112 people.

This year, it cost up to \$450,000 and attracted 15,000 people.

These are the cold, hard facts and [why council staff last October recommended](#) that the festival be discontinued because it had seemingly had its day.

But the decision to kill Peppa Pig, as it were, proved too emotional for the majority of the councillors and they agreed to press on in 2015 – turning the festival into more of a grassroots, simple-kids-fun kind of event with an extra heavy reliance on volunteers.

According to council spokesman **Nick Higgins**, this formula is set to be repeated in 2016.

“Council will shortly call for expressions of interest from local people keen to be part of the festival’s community consultation panel,” he said via email.

“The panel worked well this year and generated plenty of ideas and enthusiasm for the festival.”



It is wonderful to see such ideas and enthusiasm and I am sure most of the 15,000 people who turned up this year had a terrific time, but is this the best use of \$450,000 each year to generate more visitors to Warrnambool?

Cr Kylie Gaston [asked a question this week](#) of **Cr Brian Kelson**, when he successfully pushed for free CBD parking over December and January, as to where the \$70,000 in lost car parking revenue could be cut from within the budget.

I can think of at least one area...

For my money, I think free off-street parking over the busy summer period will do more for local traders than seven days of Fun4Kids where most of the action is confined to a plastic palace on the Civic Green.

If we want to continue to run a kid's festival for, mostly, local and regional kids to enjoy, then let's embrace that idea and stop pretending that Fun4Kids is a major tourism magnet.

It was once, but it is no longer, and there still needs to be a full and frank conversation about its long-term future.



What about more fun for grown-ups?



The Fun4Kids festival in Warrnambool is gone for another year – and the grass re-growth begins ...

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [/dropcap]s Warrnambool restores the grass on the Civic Green after another whirlwind Fun4Kids festival, I can't help but wonder when we will turn our attention to more permanent attractions for grown-ups.

As one local put it, "Warrnambool is great for kids and great for the elderly, but there is not a lot for people in the middle" – and she is spot on.

Most regional cities in Victoria are coming up with new ways to attract the cashed-up, time-poor, middle-aged, middle class who want to spend their dollars on unique experiences and personal indulgence, but Warrnambool persists with "big things" that lose money.

Two of our attractions – Fun4Kids and Flagstaff Hill – cost the Warrnambool City Council around \$1 million a year to prop up. In a queer kind of logic, we continue to subsidise the cost of these attractions to ensure their survival, but still consider them successful and necessary.

It would be understandable if these attractions were just starting out and trying to find their feet, after all, every new concept needs time to establish itself. But Fun4Kids is in its 14th year – 14th! – and still doesn't break even despite the valiant efforts of all those involved and how much fun there is to be had.



Quirky shops and cafes – like this little cafe in the town of Penguin, Tasmania (popln 3924) – are what put a town (or city) on the tourist map.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [/dropcap] report commissioned by the council last year was upbeat in its assessment of Fun4Kids. It found the event created direct expenditure of around \$1.9 million and that this, in turn, stimulates even more economic activity which – based on a series of sums and guesstimates – brings the total benefit to an estimated \$3.69 million.

These figures, however, are always hard to quantify – where does this \$3.7 million, if it exists, actually go?

From the council report, it appears local accommodation is a big winner through filling more beds in winter, but other traders are less affected.

Of the 95 traders who responded to a council survey, 50 per cent said their turnover *remained about the same for this time of year* and only nine (10 per cent) said it was significantly

higher.

Some may consider \$450,000 a year a small price to pay for an injection of winter tourists, but if we add up the total cost over 14 years – around \$6 million – you start to wonder what we have to show for the money.

Perhaps the \$6 million would have been better spent helping to establish a series of experiences that run all year round?

You only have to look at any of the recent Victorian tourism reports to see where the future lies: eco-tourism, food, wine, art, culture, boutique/quirky shops and unique, luxury experiences. In other words, fun for grown ups who may, or may not, also want to take their kids along.



Tanya Connellan and Liz Foreman from the Merrijig Inn are part of a new artisan food trail that has started around the Port Fairy district.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] 0 [/dropcap]nce again, Port

Fairy is leading the way. It is hard to believe today, but 30 years ago Port Fairy was a very cheap place to live because it was considered a dumpy backwater.

Since then, it has reinvented itself spectacularly by tapping into its natural assets – its seaside location, history, charming buildings (see our story this week on [Coffin Sally's bar](#)) and its access to the rich, fertile soils that support a boutique food and wine industry.

The same week as Fun4Kids started, for example, Port Fairy used its [Winter Warmer Weekends](#) to launch an artisan food trail.

Shane Clancey, from Basalt Wines, Killarney, has teamed up with the [Merrijig Inn](#), Port Fairy, and [Shaw River Buffalo Cheese](#), at Yambuk – among others – to showcase the fantastic food and wine that is produced in the area.

I can see Melbourne folk salivating already at the thought of driving down the Great Ocean Road, taking in the 12 Apostles, winding their way through the [12 Apostles Gourmet Food Trail](#) that incorporates the [Timboon Distillery](#), [Newton's Ridge](#), Apostle Whey Cheeses and others, then zooming on to Port Fairy to do more of the same, before retiring for the night in a gorgeous 1800's cottage with a crackling fire.

Why would they bother to linger in Warrnambool?



Warrnambool has an ecological, environmental and cultural gem on its doorstep with Tower Hill, but does little to capitalise on its potential. Image: [Travel Victoria](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap] have [written before](#) about how frustrating it is that Warrnambool does not make more of its natural advantages. We have one of the most spectacular and accessible coastlines in south-west Victoria, but is there even one classy restaurant with sea views?

We have Tower Hill on our doorstep, which [has already been identified](#) as a potential tourism mecca, but what are we doing to help capitalise on its appeal to bushwalkers, birdwatchers and international visitors who appreciate our indigenous heritage far more than we do?

We have a city centre full of historic intact buildings – those that have not burnt down or been demolished – but what are we doing to assist those people trying to convert them into cafes, galleries, cosy wine bars, jazz clubs and boutique shops?

We have an incredible whale nursery, but is there a fun, interactive place for visitors to go and hear a whale sing, or

to touch its 'skin', or learn about how and why they come to Warrnambool each year?

And we have an art gallery that was one of the best in regional Victoria when it opened in 1986, but has not seen any meaningful funds spent on it since – there isn't even a cafe – and it now relies increasingly on corporate events and weddings for income.

Imagine, just for a moment, if we didn't spend \$450,000 a year on subsidising 8 days of Fun4Kids, but instead divided this money to help kickstart great ideas – food trails, artisan studios, laneway cafes, cosy bars, boutique shops, a bush tucker cafe at Tower Hill and the like.

Perhaps then Warrnambool would have some enduring funk – as well as fun – for people of all ages.



The [Whale Museum](http://the-terrier.com/subscribe-2/) in Friday Harbor, Washington State, is devoted to orcas and shows that a museum does not have to be big, to be interesting.

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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...