

Flagstaff Hill in danger of missing the boat



What does the future hold for the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village that turns 40 later this month?

OPINION

It's two years since the Warrnambool City Council announced a review into the future of the **Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village** – which turns 40 later this month – but we are still none the wiser as to what its future holds.

The \$90,000 masterplan, funded by the council and State Government, has resulted in a draft document that is yet to be released publicly and there is no indication as to when this will happen.

It is no secret that the colonial village and maritime museum is in trouble: it is struggling to find its place in a rapidly shifting world of tourism tastes that are vastly different to

those of 1974 or even 1994.

The on-site accommodation at Flagstaff Hill has been popular, but overall visitor numbers have been falling and costing the council around \$500,000 a year to meet the shortfall (a shortfall that would be much greater if it weren't for volunteer staff).

Council CEO Bruce Anson recently told a media briefing that the village needs 80,000 visitors a year to break even, but is recording around 60,000: this is a lot of lost ground...and the competition is about to get a lot hotter.



One of the images from the [Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#) depicting what might be possible at Port Campbell or Peterborough.

I have [written previously](#) how I believe Flagstaff Hill has had its day and recreated colonial villages are out of step with the boom in eco-tourism, 'experience' tourism, and 'indulgence' tourism based around food, wine and luxury accommodation.

This is exactly the sort of tourism that is being talked about – and mapped out – just down the road under the dynamic [Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#).

I say dynamic, because while the Flagstaff Hill draft masterplan remains under wraps, the Shipwreck Coast Masterplan hit the ground running last year and will release its draft plan for public feedback in April.

The [detailed Shipwreck Coast Masterplan](#) is being developed by Parks Victoria, Tourism Victoria, the Moyne Shire Council and the Corangamite Shire Council and, last year, held a number of packed community forums to thrash out priorities and ideas.

Remarkably, the “Shipwreck Coast” at the centre of all this energy and excitement does not include Warrnambool – it is barely mentioned outside of the plan’s maps – and the Warrnambool City Council is not a formal partner.

Instead, the focus is firmly on managing and enhancing a 28km stretch of coast from Peterborough to Port Campbell and Princetown and the hinterland around these three towns, including places like Timboon and Simpson.

The WCC told me that its tourism manager, Peter Abbott, had provided input to the plan and would be speaking with Parks Victoria in coming weeks and that, overall, it supported any moves to improve the Great Ocean Road that would help bring tourists our way.

Despite this optimism that we will pick up tourists almost by default, when the masterplan does cast its eyes further afield, like in its suggestion of a first-class golfing circuit, it leap-frogs right over Warrnambool and suggests golfers visit Peterborough, Port Fairy and...Robe.



The portion of the Shipwreck Coast that is at the centre of a draft masterplan to be released next month.

This passing over of Warrnambool – which often happens when talking about the Great Ocean Road – is even more frustrating because of the potential for Warrnambool to be a hub of fine food, wine, eco-tourism and ‘experience’ tourism.

But let’s stick with Flagstaff Hill for the moment.

Aside from the focus and energy around Peterborough and Port Campbell in the Shipwreck Coast Masterplan, a potential knock-out blow for Flagstaff Hill is a proposed \$100-\$150 million interpretive and education centre at Loch Ard Gorge.

Such a centre would locate the *Loch Ard* story and a significant chunk of the shipwreck coast story at Loch Ard Gorge – there would be even less incentive to travel further down the coast to Warrnambool to see it recreated, hence the WCC has started to talk about Flagstaff Hill “telling the story of the Great Southern Ocean”, whatever that entails.

The idea of a first-class visitor centre at Loch Ard Gorge has been bubbling away [since it was flagged in 2010](#). The Victorian Tourism Council listed it as a priority in 2011 and, in 2012, the [Great Ocean Road Destination Management Plan](#) (funded by the State and Federal Governments) gave it number one billing in its list of eight 'game changer' projects.



Parks Victoria told me last week that the centre remains a “proposal”, and perhaps we will know more when the Shipwreck Coast masterplan draft is released in April, but there is no doubt that improving visitor facilities at Loch Ard Gorge and the nearby 12 Apostles is a top priority at the highest levels.

Given the importance of the Great Ocean Road to national tourism, I would suggest it is not a matter of *if* the Loch Ard Gorge centre will be built, but *when*.

Flagstaff Hill is not naïve: [it is aware of the threat](#) from this potential development as one of many challenges it faces

in trying to chart its new course against stiff winds of change.

Despite this, and despite Flagstaff Hill occupying one of Warrnambool's most prominent locations, there is still no sense of urgency or real excitement about its future or how the site might look and operate in five, 10 or 15 years time.

If we want to remain a relevant and appealing part of the "Shipwreck Coast", we need to start moving on Flagstaff Hill *now* and generate some of the same energy, excitement and forward thinking that is happening between Peterborough and Princetown.

To do otherwise is to risk missing the boat and watch Flagstaff Hill slowly sink into obscurity.

[Until last year, Warrnambool was the base for Shipwreck Coast Tourism, but this body has been wound up as part of a new Great Ocean Road Tourism Board that will cover Geelong to the SA border.]