

Historic trader levy vote: it's not easy to say no



Warrnambool traders will have their say from next week on the controversial Commerce Warrnambool levy that will be partly used to fund promotions such as these.

OPINION

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] A [dropcap]fter months of often acrimonious debate, Warrnambool traders will have an historic vote from next week on whether they want to pay a special levy for a chamber of commerce – and those against the move will have to work a lot harder than those in favour.

It is the first time the **Warrnambool City Council** has used its power to introduce special rates and levies on [behalf of a](#)

specific group – Commerce Warrnambool – and at this scale; 1337 traders will be affected.

The proposed levy will cost each trader up to \$300 a year for the next five years and give Commerce Warrnambool an annual budget of at least \$300,000 to spend on marketing the city, advocating for business and setting up networking opportunities and professional workshops.

Under the strange rules of the Victorian Local Government Act, those traders who don't want to pay the levy will have to jump through hoops to make sure their vote is counted, whereas those who support the levy won't have to do anything.

Here are the steps:

First, traders who object have to make sure they receive the notice that is coming in the mail from the council.

Second, they have to tick the "no" box.

Third, they have to attach evidence that they are responsible for paying the rates on their business premises, either by attaching a copy of their lease, a letter from the property owner, or a stat dec.

Fourth, they have to mail the letter back (postage paid).

And they have to do it all by November 3.



Warrnambool's CBD, like those in other regional cities, is in a state of transition as old businesses close and new ones open. But is a new levy the answer to helping businesses thrive?

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] I [/dropcap]t's a time consuming list of things to do while also running a business, a family and a life, but this is what dissenting traders will have to do if they wish to be heard.

Not only that, but almost 670 traders will have to make the effort if the "no" vote is to succeed, whereas the remaining 670 voters who might support the levy can sit tight.

It is a cockeyed system and reflects the history of this part of the Local Government Act, which was introduced in 1989 so that local councils could raise "special rates and charges" for all manner of things from footpaths and drainage works, to shopping centre promotions.

It seems when there is more ratepayer money to be made, the

harder it is to object, the better!

Not surprisingly, given how the voting system works, the “no” campaign – aka [The Warrnambool Traders Action Group](#) – has been hitting both the pavement and social media for months to argue why the levy should not go ahead and how to vote against it. “No” posters have appeared in shopfronts across town, and its Facebook page has accumulated 477 followers.

By contrast, the “yes” campaign – aka Commerce Warrnambool – has been almost eerily quiet up until the last week, when it began to place ads in the local paper advocating for the levy.

There has been no doorknocking or poster pasting, but [its Facebook page](#) did reveal earlier this week that it intended to do an information mailout via the council, until the council said it could not be involved (for obvious reasons). The mailout will now come via Australia Post.



BIBA Hairdressing, in Timor St, is one of the success stories happening in the CBD. Image courtesy [Sinead Murphy](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T
[/dropcap]he difficulty for Commerce Warrnambool in trying to pitch the levy is twofold: first, it is trying to boost its membership by force.

In 2011, a year after Commerce Warrnambool began, it had only 80 members and an annual budget of \$24,000. The levy is partly a backdoor way of making traders support an old-fashioned, traditionally male-dominated concept that perhaps has had its day.

Surely if so many traders were keen to support a chamber of commerce, they would just sign up? Meanwhile, new business networks are gathering strength, like the [Young Professionals Warrnambool](#) and [Business and Professional Women South-West](#).

Second, despite the best of intentions, the ideas put forward by Commerce Warrnambool have failed to inspire those struggling under the weight of high rents, online shopping and a tired-looking CBD.

Christmas promotions, car raffles and shop-local campaigns are not new. Indeed a council-backed [Christmas promotion, complete with Santa arriving by helicopter](#), ran in 2011 and yet shops are still closing down in the CBD.

Car raffles and the like are short-term, sugar-fixes when what is really needed is an acceptance that the Internet is the industrial revolution of our time and not all businesses will survive. Some will adapt, others will die and new businesses will emerge.

In my view, a new levy won't make an inch of difference compared to the revitalisation of Liebig St that is underway at last, and a lowering of CBD rents to realistic, regional-based levels (this is in the hands of property owners) to inspire new businesses and support those in transition.

How many traders share this view remains to be seen when the

votes finally come in – or not.

[box]Note: If less than 50 per cent of businesses object to the new levy, the council will make the final decision on whether it goes ahead at its December 1 meeting. Anyone can make a submission for or against the levy and can do so in writing by Nov 3 to the CEO, Warrnambool City Council, 25 Liebig St, Warrnambool, 3280. All submissions are public documents.[/box]

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