Transparency lacking over trader levy

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t is interesting to see **Mainstreet Australia** adding its voice to those urging Warrnambool traders to pay a special levy to fund a $3 million marketing and promotion campaign by **Commerce Warrnambool** over the next five years.

Mainstreet Australia president **Steve Bentley** was recently the focus of a local news article in which he praised the trader levy, saying it was one way to counteract the impact of online shopping and that it had worked very successfully for Geelong, where he works as part of the City of Geelong Council.

As infamous model Mandy Rice-Davies once said, "he would say that, wouldn't he" because what Mr Bentley failed to mention – or what the news article failed to report – is that the person who was paid by Commerce Warrnambool to develop the trader levy, **Peter McNabb** from Peter McNabb and Associates, is a key figure in Mainstreet Australia.

Indeed Mr McNabb's own website explains that he "played a leading role in the establishment of the Victorian version of

Mainstreet in 1996, and was its inaugural President from 1996 to 2001″.

The Mainstreet Australia website states that Mr McNabb is a current committee member and a life member of the association.

As part of his duties with Mainstreet Australia, Mr McNabb was a judge for the annual Mainstreet Australia Awards in 2008, 2010 and 2012. The awards include a category for groups that have a "special rate and charge budget" of under $100,000 (in 2014) and a category for those who have a special rate and charge budget over $100,000 (in 2014).

In other words, Mainstreet Australia rewards those associations that oversee the sort of special rates and charges that Mr McNabb specialises in setting up.

Peter McNabb from Peter McNabb and Associates. Image: Peter McNabb and Associates.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] S[/dropcap]pecial rates and

charges are part of what Mainstreet Australia is all about and it is not ashamed to say so. In fact it held a conference in 2009 in which the use of special levies – right down to how to avoid and handle appeals to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal – was a particular focus.

There is nothing wrong with any of this activity, after all, Mainstreet Australia is a business lobby group and Mr McNabb is paid to help business groups, but what *is* wrong is that none of this has been disclosed.

This means that you, me, and all the traders who are grappling with whether the controversial levy is a good idea or not, think that Mainstreet Australia is offering an independent assessment.

It is not.

I believe it is part of a strategy designed to make those traders who are uneasy about the levy feel as if there is something wrong with *them*, because they can't see its "obvious" benefits and may wish to vote "no" to its introduction.

We saw another example of this when those local traders who clearly object to the levy – which would add an impost to their overheads until 2019-20 – were asked to come up with a better idea, as if this was somehow their responsibility. Why should they have to find a solution to a problem that they did not create?

It is muddle-headed thinking and, to my mind, a dangerous precedent for how objectors are treated.

Even the intervention of **Mayor Neoh** later this week to try and find a middle ground between Commerce Warrnambool and dissenting traders speaks volumes as to how the process has been rushed through.

High rents in Warrnambool's main street of Liebig St remain a burden to many traders…and will continue to do so.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A[/dropcap]nd while all of this pushing and pulling and lack of transparency is going on, another Warrnambool CBD trader has announced that they will close. Not simply because of online shopping. Not because of a lack of any "buy local" campaign, but largely because of high rents in the main street of Liebig St.

This, plus the lack of any free, timed parking in the CBD during the week, remains the single biggest issue facing many traders who can't afford to pay the rent and make a decent living.

A special levy is not a magic wand and will not resolve these fundamental problems, which is why a levy has attracted so much dissent in places such as Croydon, Bendigo and Adelaide.

And for every success story about the levy in other towns,

there is equally a story about those Warrnambool traders who feel the extra cost would provide little benefit above the promotional schemes that are already in place via Warrnambool City Council, the Great South Coast Group and the Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism Board.

There are also those traders, like the one who called us this week, who run the sort of businesses that don't usually feature in marketing campaigns – think laundrettes, funeral parlours, architects and the like – but who will still pay the fee.

Given the scale and scope of this levy, it needs careful thought and absolute transparency as traders decide whether to support the idea or whether, as is their democratic right, they simply say no.

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