

Spend a dollar

*Bernadette
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THE heart of Geelong's CBD is undergoing two major redevelopments as part of the Revitalising Central Geelong project.

The west-end of Little Malop St

— along with James St and Shorts Place — are being transformed as part of the Laneways project, while \$8 million is being spent by the Victorian Government and City of Greater Geelong on the Green Spine project in Malop St.

Unfortunately, there has been a detrimental impact to businesses operating in the construction zones and it's been concerning to hear reports from traders experiencing a decline in business since the works began.

An extensive engagement process has been in place between the Revitalising Central Geelong team

— made up of Victorian Government and City of Greater Geelong officers — and traders in central Geelong.

Communication and support has included weekly updates from Revitalising Central Geelong while businesses have also been encouraged to participate in a Shop to Win promotion to entice shoppers into central Geelong for the chance to win \$1000 cash each month plus weekly vouchers to be given away.



Signage throughout the city and other forms of promotion, such as cinema advertising, have been deployed to inform the public that businesses within the construction zones are open for trading.

Internationally, many case studies exist where construction works have disrupted business trade. One example from the US stands out as an exemplar of collaboration on a very broad scale.

HARD WORK: Shops in Little Malop St are under stress.

Picture: MIKE DUGDALE

From 2010 to 2014, hundreds of mostly small businesses along an 18km stretch of University Avenue between the

cities of Minneapolis and St Paul were confronted by a construction zone while a \$US957 million light-rail link was built.

Businesses along the line were opposed to the development, mostly because 87 per cent of on-street parking would disappear.

Sensing the angst among traders — and not wanting to see empty shops along the route — more than a dozen not-for-profit organisations, foundations, government agencies and business associations including the Midway Area Chamber of Commerce teamed up to form a public-private partnership that provided a range of services to aid about 800 small and independent businesses.

Importantly, they helped businesses identify ways to strengthen their operations by expanding sales channels, developing customer-oriented communications strategies and sharing costs.

The partnership also provided \$US6 million in forgivable loans and grant programs to small business operators to offset their losses and increase customer traffic.

A survey of Central Corridor business owners in 2012 — midway through construction — ranked financial assistance as one of the most helpful mitigation strategies.

As additional support, the Midway Area Chamber of Commerce issued a coupon book offering discounts to many of its member businesses and also organised monthly events at restaurants that had construction in front of them.

These events brought many new customers to businesses susceptible to revenue loss.

Closer to home, the Warrnambool City Council's \$15 million CBD Renewal Project of its main city streets began earlier this year and is scheduled to be completed by October 2018.

It's being conducted in two stages and the council developed a website to keep traders, shoppers and the community regularly updated on the progress of the works.

As an incentive to keep people shopping in the CBD, the city council got together with key businesses to offer a range of prizes — including \$1 million.

While the current construction projects in central Geelong will undoubtedly prove to be beneficial to the long-term vision for Geelong as a clever and creative city, it is important we consider how we can support those businesses in the construction zones now, during this period of intense disruption.

Whether it's going a little bit out of your way to buy a coffee or finding a new lunch time venue, any support that you can give these traders will be greatly appreciated.

If we want our CBD to be a thriving, bustling centre of activity then we need to ensure that the mostly small, independent business operators are supported. After all, isn't that what all great and caring communities do?

Bernadette Uzelac is Geelong Chamber of Commerce CEO. Follow the chamber on Twitter @GeelongChamber