

Banyule Ratepayers Action Group Inc. A0103920Z

Banyule Residents Action Group Inc. A0106613X

SUBMISSION TO THE VICTORIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATION REVIEW

BANYULE CITY COUNCIL

SUMMARY

1. BRAG Inc. supports Option C nine wards with nine Councillors i.e. a single Councillor representing each ward, given that this is the only single Councillor option put forward by the VEC.
2. BRAG Inc. believes that on balance that the current structure of seven wards with seven Councillors with some modifications to ward boundaries (as outlined in our preliminary submission) provides the best structure for Banyule.
3. BRAG Inc. recommends the proposed two new wards be named Heathorn ward (currently Chelsworth) and Lasslett ward (currently Sherbourne). It also recommends the renaming of Olympia ward to Farrell ward.
4. Although outside the scope of this review BRAG supports the retention of attendance voting for Banyule Council elections.
5. BRAG requests the opportunity to be heard at the public hearing on the 25th September 2019 and will be represented by its chairperson David Mulholland and Kevan Hill. BRAG has also been requested to speak on behalf of residents who have listed this request in their submission.

INTRODUCTION

The Banyule Ratepayers Action Group Inc and the Banyule Residents Action Group Inc. (known commonly as BRAG) are incorporated associations under the Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012.

The purposes of the associations are—

- Work for the Banyule community to achieve its expectations
- Integrity and honesty
- Encourage genuine, open and frank communications
- Renew and/or refresh urban assets through discouraging inappropriate development but encouraging high quality, appropriate development
- Subject Councillors and Council staff performance to public audit and make them

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- publicly fully accountable for their decisions and recommendations
- Ensure that political parties do not control Council decision making by agitating for the election of competent people with real world experience outside of politics

BRAG through its membership believes that it is well placed to make a submission to the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) for this important review.

BRAG has in the last 12 months made submissions to:

- Council budgets and finances
- Council land purchases
- Planning issues
- Traffic safety and management issues
- Waste Management
- Parking

BRAG has made submissions to external bodies on the following:

- North East Link Project – EES submissions
- VEC – Banyule Local Representation Review 2019 - Preliminary
- UDF C120 appeal process

BANYULE CITY

Banyule is located 15 kilometres north-east of Melbourne and covers an area of 62 square kilometres. Comprising 20 suburbs, the city is primarily a residential area, renowned for its open spaces and plentiful parklands, especially along the Yarra and Plenty River valleys.

There are industrial areas in Heidelberg West, Greensborough/Briar Hill and Bundoora, as well as institutions such as the Austin and Repatriation Medical Centre and the Simpson Army Barracks. Banyule also has a range of educational, health and leisure facilities.

The Yarra River runs along the City's south border while the west is defined by Darebin Creek.

Banyule offers a range of shopping centres from the large regional shopping complex at Greensborough, to local shopping villages/centres at Eaglemont, Ivanhoe, East Ivanhoe, Heidelberg, Macleod and Montmorency.

The population of Banyule is estimated at 130,237. This total population has only increased by 13,000 since the last review in 2007.

One of the key drivers of demographic change in Banyule is the age structure of the population and the growing number of empty nesters. The housing choices of this group will affect the demographic and residential makeup of the City over the next three decades.

In the southern end of the City there has been a significant growth due to apartments, particularly near the activity centres in Ivanhoe and Heidelberg and this is likely to continue.

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CURRENT ELECTORAL STRUCTURE

Banyule City is a subdivided municipality with seven wards and a single Councillor representing each ward and therefore a total of seven Councillors. These wards are currently called Bakewell, Beale, Griffin, Grimshaw, Hawdon, Ibbott and Olympia.

The political make-up of the current Council is 1 blue, 1 red, 1 green, 1 independent green, 2 independents and 1 independent ex red. The gender make-up is 1 female and 6 males.

COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST

There are a number of clear differences between the suburbs within Banyule City.

Heidelberg West area stands out from other parts of the municipality on a number of indices of disadvantage (located in Olympia Ward).

In contrast, Lower Plenty (Hawdon Ward), Eaglemont, Ivanhoe, Ivanhoe East (Griffin Ward), St Helena, Eltham North (Beale Ward) and Yallambie (Bakewell Ward) stand out as the wealthier suburbs. Lower Plenty particularly stands out in having larger parcels of land.

A very large bio medical precinct is located at the southern end of the City (Griffin Ward).

Heidelberg Heights and Bellfield (Olympia Ward) have in recent years become home to many younger professionals.

There are three activity centres within Banyule, Ivanhoe, Heidelberg and Greensborough.

Rosanna, Macleod (Ibbott Ward) and Watsonia (Grimshaw Ward) have larger proportions of older voters, whereas Heidelberg West (Olympia Ward) has a significant Somali population.

Data from the 2016 Census indicate that Heidelberg West, Bellfield, St Helena and Eltham North have higher proportions of families with children, whereas Heidelberg, Heidelberg Heights, Rosanna, Macleod and Watsonia have larger proportions of older voters. Recent arrivals to Australia are found in larger proportions in the south-west of the municipality, particularly Heidelberg West, Bellfield and Heidelberg Heights. This diversity means that the Council and Councillors must respond differently to the needs of some geographic areas of the municipality, through both its service delivery and its representation. The challenge is therefore to consider a structure which best aligns electoral representation to the needs and aspirations of the community.

In the 2007 review undertaken by the VEC they concluded at that time that the single Councillor ward structure captured on balance communities of interest and recommended to the Minister for Local Government that the current ward structure be maintained, albeit with some minor boundary changes albeit to better reflect Councillor to voter ratios.

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Given that the VEC recommended only one option of single Councillor wards (Option C) BRAG supports this option but on balance still believes that the current ward structure, i.e. 7 separate wards, provides the best option for Banyule. (Refer to BRAG’s preliminary submission.)

MAPS

OPTION C MAP

The boundaries appear appropriate and align with communities of interest.

OPTION A MAP

Communities of interest are lost totally in this option. If the three Councillors elected to South Ward live in Ivanhoe East will they support the disadvantaged areas of Heidelberg West and the ethnic populations in those areas?

North West ward will be divided into two parts by the North East Link.

OPTION B MAP

This option divides Banyule into three very unequal wards from a socio-economic perspective and would be huge areas for Councillors to cover.

OPTION C – 9 SINGLE WARDS (BRAG’S RECOMMENDED OPTION)

The reasons BRAG puts forward for recommending this option are as follows:

- Option C better represents Banyule’s communities of interest.
- BRAG Inc. still believes that a seven single Councillor ward system (the current structure) provides the best option for Banyule. (refer to our preliminary submission)
- In single wards residents generally know their elected Councillors and are comfortable in approaching them although it is noted that this has changed since the election of politically affiliated Councillors not living in the ward that they are elected to. It is to be noted that the election of politically affiliated Councillors will be increased under a multi ward structure, as this has occurred in neighbouring municipalities.
- On any major issues residents can freely contact any Councillor for support
- VEC found that single Councillor wards best suited BCC in 2007 and little has changed in 13 years except a slight increase in population.
- In BCC Councillors have not only represented their wards but also shown a non parochial attitude to major municipal wide projects eg Watermarc in Greensborough,

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Civic Centre in Greensborough, Ivanhoe Library and Cultural Hub in Ivanhoe and regional playgrounds in Heidelberg, Heidelberg West and Bellfield.

- Option C gives responsibility to 3 Councillors for each of the activity centres as they are in separate wards.
- Ward councillors understood local issues and effectively advocated in the interests of their residents.

OPTION A AND OPTION B – MULTI COUNCILLOR WARDS

It is noted that the VEC supports the introduction of multi Councillor wards, as is demonstrated in the neighbouring Council VEC reports of Boroondara (final report), Manningham (preliminary report) and Darebin (preliminary report)

BRAG also notes that the preferred option put forward by the VEC is a multi Councillor option (Option A).

BRAG puts forward the following reasons against these two options for Banyule.

- Multi Councillor wards encourage political affiliation and discourage independents and lower socio-economic candidates due to the increased cost of campaigns.
- Political affiliation can lead to Councillors being elected who do not live in or have an affinity with the ward they are elected to represent. (as is currently the case in Griffin Ward)
- Campaign costs and workloads would increase under options A and B leading to political candidates being elected.
- Multi Councillor wards lead to a large number of “dummy” candidates making it confusing for residents about who to vote for. One argument put forward by the proponents for the multi ward option is that it increases the number of candidates. Whilst this is true it is only due to the increased number of “dummy” candidates running in these wards eg compare neighbouring Darebin election in 2016.
- Options A and B could lead to sections of the ward being unrepresented if elected Councillors came from one section of the ward or outside the ward.
- Options A and B not conforming with the requirements of the current Local Government Bill.
- Communities of interest would not be appropriately catered for compared to the option C. This would cause richer densely populated areas like Heidelberg or Ivanhoe outvoting Somali populations in West Heidelberg as an example. This option would favour political parties rather than independents and BRAG Inc. saw this as a great disadvantage for local democracy.
- In a 3 Councillor ward some Councillors may not put in any effort leaving all the workload to 1 or 2 Councillors. There is no hiding for a Councillor in a single Councillor ward.
- Option B in particular divides Banyule into three very unequal wards from a socio economic perspective.

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- The arguments put forward by the proponents for a multi Councillor ward option that this will lead to a Council with more cultural, ethnicity and gender diversity do not stand up to scrutiny when other Councils with this structure are investigated. It is noted that the Greens political party endorsed three male candidates and no females at the 2016 election. **However what it does lead to is a Council that is controlled by major political parties particularly red and green.**
- Multi-councillor wards could lead to conflict or competition between Councillors and that this would be detrimental to local representation

WARD NAMES

It is noted that the preliminary report has recommended two new ward names in the BRAG recommended option C. “Chelsworth” ward in the south taking in areas of Ivanhoe and “Sherbourne” ward covering mainly the suburbs of Montmorency and Lower Plenty.

- There is already has a major park called Chelsworth Park which is located in Ivanhoe East in Griffin ward and this would be confusing for voters. Margaret Heathorn OAM was a significant local Ivanhoe identity. She initiated the building of an accommodation house at the Austin repatriation hospital for rural families while mothers were attending the Mercy Maternity Hospital in Heidelberg. She also assisted many elderly with meals and fellowship at the Linlithgow Centre in Ivanhoe in the early 2000’s.
- There is a road within this area called Sherbourne Road. Fred Lasslett was a prominent soldier in World War 2, having survived the Burma railway horrors. He was a long serving member of Heidelberg RSL and former President and also associated with Montmorency RSL.

Olympia ward has some historical value as the Olympic Village where athletes in 1956 were housed is within this area. The Olympic Village only represents a small part of the ward. However like other areas of Heidelberg West many areas are now being gentrified as younger professionals move into the area and housing stock is upgraded. There is an opportunity to rename the ward after early 19th century pioneers the Farrell family who lived in this area.

An historic farm operated by the Farrell family between Southern Rd and Banksia St, Waterdale Rd & Darebin Creek in the mid 1800’s. Their homestead, Darebin-Ivanhoe, was located near Mulberry St Heidelberg West. The bridge on Bell St connecting Heidelberg to Preston is known as Farrell’s Bridge.

The family were amongst the very first Irish migrant families to settle in the area, and while the original farm constituted approximately 1/3 of today’s ward area, the family were prominent and involved in many activities that have become historically significant to the area, and that are still of significance to residents today.

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BRAG recommends that “Chelsworth” ward be named “Heathorn” ward after the well respected and loved local Ivanhoe identity Margaret Heathorn OAM.

BRAG recommends that “Sherbourne” ward be named “Lasslett” ward after the former President of Heidelberg RSL and Burma railway survivor Fred Lasslett.

BRAG recommends that Olympia ward be renamed “Farrell” ward after the 19th century pioneer family who established their homestead and farm within this area.

COUNCIL ELECTIONS

BRAG Inc. recognises that it is not part of the brief of this review. However BRAG Inc. supports strongly the continuance of the attendance voting system for Banyule Council elections. Residents want to be able to identify their Councillor and potential candidates and this can best occur by an attendance voting system where they can “eye-ball” the candidates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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