

Victorian Electoral Commission. Local Council Electoral Representation Review. Boroondara City Council.

Response to VEC's Preliminary Report

Lighter Footprints welcomes the release on 10 April 2019 by The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) of its Preliminary Report as part of its regular electoral representation review of the City of Boroondara; and appreciates the further opportunity to comment on this matter.

Lighter Footprints is an active, community based group of residents living in Boroondara and adjoining municipalities. Our records show that we have regular and meaningful contact with around 2300 members and supporters in this area.

The group came together in 2006 around a shared concern over the serious challenge of climate change and has continued to grow in size and influence since then. We see ourselves as a community of interest drawn together around the recognition that climate change has been scientifically demonstrated and that urgent action is needed to respond to this threat.

Carolyn Ingvarson
Convenor, Lighter Footprints



Our position

We note that three options are being considered by the VEC:

- Option A (preferred option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from four wards (three three-councillor wards and one two-councillor ward).
- Option B (alternative option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from five wards (four two-councillor wards and one three-councillor ward).
- Option C (alternative option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from eleven single-councillor wards.

We support VEC's preferred option (Option A) on the grounds that this would:

- facilitate greater Council representation for the large community of interest that exists in Boroondara around the need for more government action on climate change;

- address the democratic deficit currently existing in Boroondara around the local community's participation in choosing its representatives and involvement in Council decision making; and
- expand the capacity of our local representatives to make high quality decisions on the increasingly complex matters being considered by local government particularly in the field of climate change.

We support Option A over the other two options under consideration. Option B goes some way towards addressing the problem of single member wards which favours the election of supporters of the status quo unwilling to address emerging issues such as climate change. It however is only a halfway house that runs the risk of inhibiting greater diversity by slowing down moves to broaden the range of candidates standing for election.

We consider Option A has the additional advantage that it would be more durable over the longer term in response to shifts in population and demographics.

We oppose Option C on the grounds that this approach no longer produces representation with the capability to handle the complex matters now confronting local government. Single member wards may have been sufficient in the days when Council was primarily concerned with local matters such as roads, bridges and rubbish collections and their major source of funds was property rates. These days are long past and councils are now dealing with matters that have implications way beyond the bounds of their local area and with huge budgets where rates are only one of a number of funding sources. The diversity that multi member wards encourage is more likely to lead to representation with the skills, knowledge, expertise and links to handle this increased complexity.

Community of Interest

Lighter Footprints is a non-partisan community group that attracts members from all political persuasions as well as age, gender and economic background. Since its establishment in 2006, it has become a well recognised and respected organisation in the Boroondara area and beyond. Lighter Footprints is notable throughout Melbourne for the size and involvement of its member and supporter base as active participants in the thinking around climate change policy.

Members and supporters bring a wide range of skills, qualifications and expertise to the table. They include scientists, engineers, economists, entrepreneurs, business owners and managers who work in businesses built on the commercial opportunities associated with environment and academics undertaking related research. This knowledge and skill underlies Lighter Footprints' reputation as an effective contributor to governments' consideration of climate change policy at all levels.

Over this period, Lighter Footprints has become one of the largest community groups in this local area and has developed an unequalled capacity for energising its members

and supporters to participate in its activities and to work together in many different ways to support its cause.

Its activities include regular monthly meetings which attract an audience of more than 50 people to hear speakers who are leaders in the scientific, economic, social and political aspects of this topic. It conducts large regular forums to foster the debate around climate change amongst the general public and is able to fill the Hawthorn Arts Centre with capacity crowds of more than 600 people. It sponsors a vibrant and highly successful letter writing group aimed at getting letters published in the national and local media. The group regularly makes well regarded submissions to public inquiries at all levels of government on matters relevant to climate change.

We consider that our activities and our links to the local community have had a significant influence on the way people see climate change. We believe that the forum that we conducted at the time of the last State Election enriched discussion around the topic and provided voters in the Hawthorn electorate with insights that informed their voting decision.

We believe however, that our success is due in great measure to the growing awareness amongst the local community that climate change is an existential issue and that Lighter Footprints offers them a structure and vehicle for expressing their concern. We have members and supporters from across the political spectrum, many of whom have become more active because of the support and resources that Lighter Footprints offers them.

The current Federal election campaign highlights the importance of climate change to the residents of the City of Boroondara where there at least three candidates running on an environment agenda. The majority of candidates have designed their pitch to voters to a large degree around climate change. Polling in the local area has indicated that voters place the environment at the top of their concerns when deciding who to vote for.

Under the current single member ward arrangement which focuses on geographical identity, there is little opportunity to stand candidates who reflect this broader community of interest. Instead, candidates tend to adopt a platform that appeals to the largest number of voters to ensure they obtain the necessary 50 percent plus one to be elected.

Making Boroondara more democratic

Being the level of government closest to where people live and dealing with issues that affect their everyday lives, it would seem that there should be many opportunities for residents to participate more consistently and effectively in the decision making that occurs in Council. And yet this does not apply in Boroondara.

At present, local government elections in Boroondara are anodyne affairs where there is virtually no clash of ideas or testing of evidence. Candidates will pitch their appeal to the notional middle ground creating a superficial contest that rests on untested and

shallow propositions. Too often, this becomes an appeal to a more complacent constituency to produce sufficient votes for election but disenfranchising a minority in the ward who would welcome a more thorough examination of the issues.

As a consequence, we end up with a council populated to a large degree with people from quite similar backgrounds who show little willingness to explore new ways to address problems and a desire to conserve the status quo. This has meant that property owners and developers and powerful interests such as the private schools and professional sporting bodies get a much more sympathetic hearing than those seeking a less commercially oriented solution.

Council meetings in Boroondara are generally not well attended by the public unless there is a specific issue affecting a particular neighbourhood or where an individual has an interest in council affairs. Public questions are strictly limited to matters on the agenda, for which the questioner has already had contact with the Council and received a written reply. The number of questions anybody can ask are restricted to no more than 11 in any 12-month period. This means that questioners are severely limited in their capacity to pursue a matter before council and that matters of urgency or with broad support cannot be explored in a timely way or in any depth.

The conduct of business at council meetings is quite perfunctory with little debate and there is a heavy reliance on agenda papers prepared by officials. Motions are often passed by unanimous vote suggesting a high degree of caucusing amongst councillors prior to the meeting. Regularly, proposals are combined for consideration and adopted en bloc so that there is little or no debate of the specifics.

Ward meetings are never or very rarely held and it is the very unusual councillor that actually becomes involved in activities in their particular ward or approaches their constituents to determine their views. Special interest groups of residents sponsored by the Council around specific topics seem to have disappeared altogether.

In the absence of such groups, the expertise and knowledge that exists within the community is unavailable to councillors. Councillors with good links into this community expertise and who can readily access these sources of advice are essential for high quality decision making. The expanding and increasingly complex matters that local government must decide underlines the need for councillors to be able to access advice beyond that available through council officials.

We welcome recent initiatives by the Council to keep the local community better informed of its activities. These include distribution of the Boroondara Newsletter by email and making it available on its website. This newsletter, however, is generally an insubstantial document full of photographs and feel good items. It does little to stimulate participation by the community in discussion about the matters that are being decided by Council.

Another initiative is the greater accessibility to the previous meeting minutes as part of the publication of the agenda papers for the current meeting on the website. The minutes, however, are limited and give no indication of whether any debate occurred or who voted for or opposed specific motions. Such information would be useful in identifying how your councillor voted as well providing reassurance that the decision took into account a full range of issues.

The consultation exercise the Council undertook in late 2016 and early 2017 on the Community Plan for the next 10 years indicated a substantial degree of enthusiasm within the local community to become involved in discussions on council activities. As part of the consultation that the Council outsourced to a private agency, there were 11,845 responses throughout the various stages and in the different forums of the project. The puzzling question is where has all this enthusiasm and involvement disappeared to and why it has not been possible to capture even a small proportion of this energy on a continuing basis.

We consider that the key place to address this democratic deficit would be to introduce multi member wards with proportional representation. Multi member elections would attract a wider, more diverse range of candidates and encourage a more active involvement by voters in choosing the candidate who best represents their interests. This approach would also encourage voters to identify more strongly with their representative and to maintain a continuing interest in the way they fulfill their responsibilities when in office. The greater diversity of representation created by this approach would also lead to more lively debates within Council and ensure greater transparency in decision making.

Capacity to address the increased complexity of local government

Single member wards may have been adequate in times when the main responsibilities of council were the provision of local infrastructure such as roads and footpaths and services such as rubbish collections and baby health centres and council budgets were much smaller. In more recent times, this approach no longer ensures that councillors have the capability to deal with the growing significance of local government on the Australian political scene, the increasing interdependency of the three layers of government, the broader remit of municipal responsibilities or the size of council operations.

The increased complexity of local government requires higher quality decision making than that needed when local councils were dealing with much less important matters and much smaller budgets:

- Local government has become an important layer of legislative authority within our community.
- Boroondara has an operating budget and a workforce equivalent to a medium sized to large company.
- Unless councillors are drawn from a wider range of people with a more diverse range of skills and interests, there is the risk that decision making will be influenced unduly by vested interests or left to council officials.

Party Politics as a factor in council elections

We dispute the contention that multi member wards would lead to or encourage the growth of party politics in council elections and decision making. Since its inception in 1994, the majority of Boroondara councillors could be considered to represent those interests that prefer things not to change. It has been virtually unknown for any candidate seeking new approaches to be elected to council and if so, they generally last only one term or are co-opted to a more conservative stance in later years.

In general, any link or allegiance to a particular political party is undeclared either as part of an election or when questions of conflict of interest are relevant. We are aware, however that there is an on-going involvement by political interests in council matters. In many cases, this relationship is kept under cover and unacknowledged

The informal nature of this influence and involvement makes it difficult to document the degree that party politics currently operates within the City of Boroondara. An example is the boycotting of the most notable independent councillor to take up the position of President of the Municipal Association of Victoria in 2016 and where the impetus for the campaign resided.

In the current Council, there is at least one councillor opening linked to a political party through their membership of the Liberal Party's Administrative Committee. Two other councillors are known to have sought pre-selection for the Liberal Party at the State and Federal level. The State Liberal Party member for Kew which is within the City of Boroondara is seen to regularly interact with several of the Boroondara councillors, to make comment on council matters and to provide in-kind support at election time for candidates known to favour a political agenda more closely aligned to the Liberal Party. We are unable to comment on the nature of Labor Party involvement.

We believe that party politics is already alive and well in the City of Boroondara and that single member wards have done nothing to discourage this. It is inevitable that party politics will increase as the importance of local government grows and its access to levers of influence and authority expand. This cannot be stopped but it can be managed and controlled through better policing of campaign funding and through codes of conduct that require our representatives to be more transparent in declaring their circumstances and accountable to their electorate.

More diverse representation and response to climate change

We believe that local government has become a significant player in the global response to climate change and that this requires a greater representation of councillors who understand the inherent issues and share a commitment to address the challenge:

- Municipal councils such as Boroondara are being required to adopt the role of first responder to deal with the impacts of extreme weather on local communities and infrastructure. This role will have a significant impact on council budgets and resources.

- Councils also have a range of levers they can use to adapt to and mitigate the effect of climate change. These include facilitating changes in transport away from fossil fuel towards electric vehicles, bicycles and public transport; better management of parklands and increased planting of trees and other vegetation; better management of water including storm water, filtration and wetlands; land planning and building approvals.

We support Option A on the grounds that it clearly provides the best opportunity to elect councillors representing the growing community of interest of people who want action to meet the threat of climate change. This option will encourage a more diverse range of candidates especially those with the necessary skills and knowledge to decide these issues and will facilitate a deeper debate around this matter.

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