

VEC Representation and Subdivision Review – Boroondara City Council Final Review Submission – May 2019

To Whom It May Concern,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a response to the VEC's electoral review of Boroondara City Council.

I support Option A, the VEC's preferred option. The larger ward, multi-councillor system proposed would deliver better representation, greater accountability and more choice during elections as well as better represent the broader communities of interest of ratepayers across the Municipality.

Firstly I would like to make a comment relating to Council's continued claims that the majority of the community wishes to keep the status quo. I am heartened that this process is not merely a numbers game but even if it were, the preliminary submissions show a strong desire within the community for change. **As noted in the VEC preliminary report (p22), if the 66 email submissions from the Boroondara Citizens for Better Democracy were considered as individual submissions** (as other template-based submissions were), **those in favour of multi-councillor wards represented 56% of preliminary review submissions.** 66 members of the community independently used this online facility in the belief that their voice would be heard. The VEC received 66 email submissions, not a sole submission that simply contained a list of 66 names. Whilst I understand that the method of delivery made it necessary to treat the community's response as a single submission, I believe it is important to not lose sight of the fact that the voices of 66 individuals who clearly want a better democracy in Boroondara and see multi-councillor wards as a means of achieving this are effectively being silenced to a single voice when Council makes such claims.

The multi-councillor wards proposed in Option A will deliver better representation. I do not believe that having a small ward has given us superior, local representation as Council would have everyone believe. In fact, at times there has been no representation at all as I detailed in my preliminary review submission. A councillor that removes themselves from the decision-making process on the basis of conflict-of-interest or is absent when important votes take place leaves their ward with no representation at all. More councillors in each ward will significantly decrease the likelihood of wards being left without representation. In addition, during contentious issues there is more likelihood of finding a councillor that genuinely listens to community views, possibly even shares them. As ratepayers we deserve, and pay for, representation. Representation is one of the tenets of democracy. The fact that we don't always receive it under the current system presents a compelling argument for change in itself.

Greater accountability drives better representation. If councillors are accountable to a larger ward and must work as a ward team it decreases the risk of parochialism. In addition, given that some councillors have self-interested motivations for serving on Council (sadly) the requirement to fairly treat the ratepayers of a larger geographical area in order to be re-elected will force them to be more collaborative and outward focused in their dealings with ratepayers. No councillors are elected to represent the Council Executive!

The larger ward structure proposed in Option A better represents communities of interest. I have lived in Ashburton for over 20 years and prior to that in Camberwell for 10 years. We live on the boundary of Ashburton, Glen Iris and Malvern East and I spend considerable time in Glen Iris, Camberwell and parts of the current Glenferrie ward as well as using services in Hawthorn and Surrey Hills. I also walk in various parklands in the Kew and Balwyn areas. I am passionate about protecting green space within the entire Municipality. The point I am making is that, like most ratepayers, I have interests that extend into geographical areas far beyond the small, relatively arbitrarily defined ward in which I reside. I strongly support the suggested ward boundaries proposed in Option A which better encapsulate communities of interest, including my own, and geographical hotspots than does the current system.

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Some submissions suggest that there are large differences in households between different suburbs and wards. A review of the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics results for each suburb shows that there is much more similarity than there is difference across the Municipality. For example, all suburbs in the Municipality are largely affluent. There are small pockets of disadvantage in most suburbs and I believe larger wards will better address the needs of these groups via a more collaborative approach.

A number of submissions have stated 'if it ain't broke don't fix it'. Unfortunately there are many in the Municipality that consider the system IS broke. As mentioned, the single councillor ward structure often leaves a ward without any representation and also encourages parochialism. At election time there is little choice for many wards and the result is that the same councillors are repeatedly elected with the role of Mayor shared around amongst the same core group of councillors like a game of musical chairs. In addition the nature of the voting often leaves a large proportion of a ward without their preferred candidate. Currently Council gets away with whatever it wants - public consultation processes seemingly designed to minimise public awareness, lack of transparency, instances of failure to administrate, poor quality research, supposedly evidence-based reports devoid of evidence and lack of accountability for money spent and decisions made. I find this unacceptable.

I would like to see councillors elected that actually hold Council to account, that question and query and that apply critical analysis. This involves actually reading documents in detail when they relate to issues of contention within the community. It is unacceptable for a community representative to rely on Council officers to explain issues / information without recognising that officers do so in a biased manner that promotes the outcome Council wants. I expect councillors to actually query details at Council meetings rather than rubber stamping Council proposals, giving unwarranted praise to the reports of Council officers and making no attempt to clarify for the public the Council's convoluted non-answers to questions posed by ratepayers who then have no right-of-reply. I would also like to see councillors' understanding of issues driven by genuine engagement with communities, including those outside their ward, rather than the current proposal-biased, influential group-biased, Council-driven approach. My hope is that a multi-councillor ward structure will elicit change leading to a more democratic Council rather than the autocratic one that currently exists.

I am pleased that the VEC report acknowledges Boroondara Council's attempt to manipulate public opinion by giving the impression that any change to structure will lead to loss of local representation. It is unacceptable to use ratepayers' money to deliver this propaganda. This is one of many examples of how Council staff withhold and manipulate information in an attempt to get a desired outcome with councillors often facilitating this. Council clearly likes the monopoly it currently has and therefore wishes to keep the status quo. The manner in which Council has gone about this review process perfectly demonstrates why change is required.

Thank you for the opportunity to have our voices heard. I strongly commend the VEC for standing firm on what they believe is the best form of electoral structure and representation for the City of Boroondara. Council exists to serve ratepayers, something I believe Council has lost sight of.

I am unable to speak at the public forum but thank you for the opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Suzette Miller

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