

Boroondara Council Representation Review submission

[REDACTED]

To whom it may concern,

It's my pleasure to submit these comments regarding the representation review currently being undertaken for the City of Boroondara. As a lifetime resident of Boroondara, I take particular interest in this matter. I believe that the current system of ten single-member wards is unworkable, undemocratic and not suitable for the current era.

Thank you for considering my opinions in this review.

Summary

- Increase number of councillors to 11
- Change to proportional representation
- Create a four-ward system with one two-member ward and three three-member wards

Number of councillors

A state-wide approach to the number of councillors would suggest that Boroondara needs an increase. The most similar metropolitan councils by number of voters, Brimbank, Monash and Moreland, all have eleven councillors.

An even number of councillors, as we now see in Boroondara, presents the issue of tied votes. These votes are broken by the mayor breaking the deadlock with a casting vote, ultimately making that ward's residents (and by extension, their voting power at the previous election) twice as powerful. This strikes me as profoundly undemocratic and should be avoided at all costs. A worst-case scenario would be if in a given year, the mayoral vote was tied and decided by the toss of a coin. The result would be that every tied vote in the following year would effectively be decided by the outcome of that coin toss. This is unlikely, but there should be zero chance of this happening in a democratic system.

Twelve councillors strikes me as too many, since no other council has that number, and it still presents the issue of tied votes being decided by the mayor. Therefore I support an increase from ten to eleven councillors in Boroondara. I note that this was the VEC's initial preferred number in 2008, but was not adopted in its final report.

Ward structure

Only a few metropolitan municipalities still use single-member wards to elect their councils, and the trend over the past decade or more has been to shift towards proportional representation. There are many reasons why multi-member wards are a superior system to single-member wards - they encourage diversity on council, keep communities in the same wards, improve how council works and make elections more democratic. The main reason against changing the single-member ward system can be summed up as "if it ain't broke, don't fix it". I do not think this is accurate for many reasons.

Diversity

Proportional representation is a much fairer system that elects councillors more in line with the overall views of the electorate. Lowering the quota of the vote to be elected will allow all voices to be heard, not just those who can command a majority of the vote.

Minority candidates are locked out of council at present and this leads to massive voter disillusionment, especially among young people like me. The largest five-year age group in our municipality is 20-24, however none of the candidates of that age bracket were elected in 2016. Indeed, looking at the current crop of councillors, none appear to be under 40. No wonder young people don't understand or care about local government - they aren't represented.

There are also no openly LGBTIQ+ councillors on council and all openly LGBTIQ+ candidates at the 2016 election were defeated. This personally affects me because as a proud gay man I believe the council has a long way to go to become an inclusive organisation and have had experience with the stale conservative culture in Boroondara council. When I was in high school, I was involved in the Boroondara Youth Services queer support group, and we tried to promote ourselves to local young people to increase our membership. The council organisation would not permit this, and when we pushed back, we were told to lobby our councillors. Under the current system, we only had older councillors to approach, who did not share the experiences we were dealing with and were unlikely to relate with us. Nevertheless, the group died, and it doesn't seem to have been re-established since. This was a vital service for a vulnerable and often forgotten demographic that the council was well-equipped to provide. A more diverse council would change the culture of the organisation and would go a long way to fixing issues like these.

Finally, the cultural diversity of the current council appears to be nil - despite council having a far more diverse population than this, for example the 15% of Boroondara residents who have a Chinese background. All candidates of colour were defeated at the 2016 election.

Geography

Proportional representation also allows for the inclusion of whole suburbs and communities of interest in the same ward, unlike now, where each ward is a hodge-podge of parts of suburbs put together to fit the model. I think this should be a priority for the review. I only feel partly connected to Lynden Ward, where I live – I use the shopping strip and library in Ashburton (Solway Ward) and the walk to my local train station passes through both wards. While I went to school in Canterbury on the northern edge of my ward, I also went to a school connected to the Ashburton community (but just outside the municipality). I would feel far more represented if I my councillors came from both of these areas.

Population growth across Boroondara is wildly unbalanced. The university precinct in Hawthorn is growing at a rapid pace and pushing the current Glenferrie Ward over quota at every recent boundary review. In 2015 the VEC redrew the boundary to balance the populations, but already, Glenferrie is now +11.48% over quota. A similar situation is happening around the Camberwell Junction in Junction Ward. This is unsustainable and will keep happening if we keep single-member. A larger multi-member ward can incorporate slower and faster-growing areas and thus keep these changes to a minimum, meaning residents have consistent representation.

Personally, as someone who lives on the border of a ward, I am at risk of being transferred to another ward which means an uncomfortable change to my local representation. This could potentially fall between elections where I would be represented by someone my neighbours and I did not elect.

Councillor workload and accountability

Having multiple councillors per ward gives residents a choice of who to approach with their issues or concerns. They will have more champions standing up for their views at the council table. At the moment, if a councillor decides that an issue is not important or they disagree, there are no other options to progress the issue. With a ward of two or three councillors having different viewpoints and opinions, residents would have more success raising their issues with council.

Councillors in the same ward would be able to share the workload of dealing with local issues, and thus be able to give more time to broader, municipality-wide issues. Additionally, having local issues dealt with by multiple councillors would mean they would be given more time and consideration than at present. There would also be more councillors available to raise ward issues with council officers or higher levels of government.

Councillors at the moment are not in competition with each other at elections, and therefore do not have any incentive to call out bad behaviour when they see it. They are also not accountable to anyone except a majority of their 13,000 person ward, the vast majority of whom do not keep a close eye on local council decision making. With larger wards, there is more accountability of councillors and their decisions from their peers, which is good for democracy. In just the recent term of council, dodgy decisions have slipped under the radar, like the decision by a bloc of conservative councillors in 2017 to pull out of the Municipal Association (to shaft another councillor who was lined up to be president), the abolition of the acknowledgement of Country, and spending \$11.7 million to redesign the website.

While there is no requirement for councillors to live in their wards, some councillors in Boroondara do not live in their wards, making it more difficult to stay updated with local or hyperlocal issues. The tiny single-member wards we have are clearly unworkable for many candidates who choose to run elsewhere, but with larger multi-member wards this would not be an issue.

Democratic outcomes

It is a fundamental principle of democracy that the voters should choose their representatives. However, this right was not afforded to the residents of Bellevue Ward in 2016, or the residents of Glenferrie and Maling Wards in 2008. When only one candidate nominates for a vacancy, they are acclaimed to the seat and no election is held. This is profoundly disappointing. In a system with more vacancies at each election, more candidates run, and there is far less chance of this happening.

With more candidates running, voters have more chance to give their primary vote to a candidate who more closely aligns with their values. Ward elections in Boroondara are currently lucky to receive four candidates (excluding funnel candidates engineered to preference someone else), which is not much choice at all. A larger field also encourages more competition and thus more contact with voters and policy discussion, helping them decide.

A multi-member ward system will reduce the number of 'wasted' votes that we currently see. If a candidate wins a ward with 51% of preferences, this means that 49% of people's votes did not elect anyone, and their votes are unrepresented on the final council. With a multi-member election of three vacancies there would be no more than 25% wasted votes.

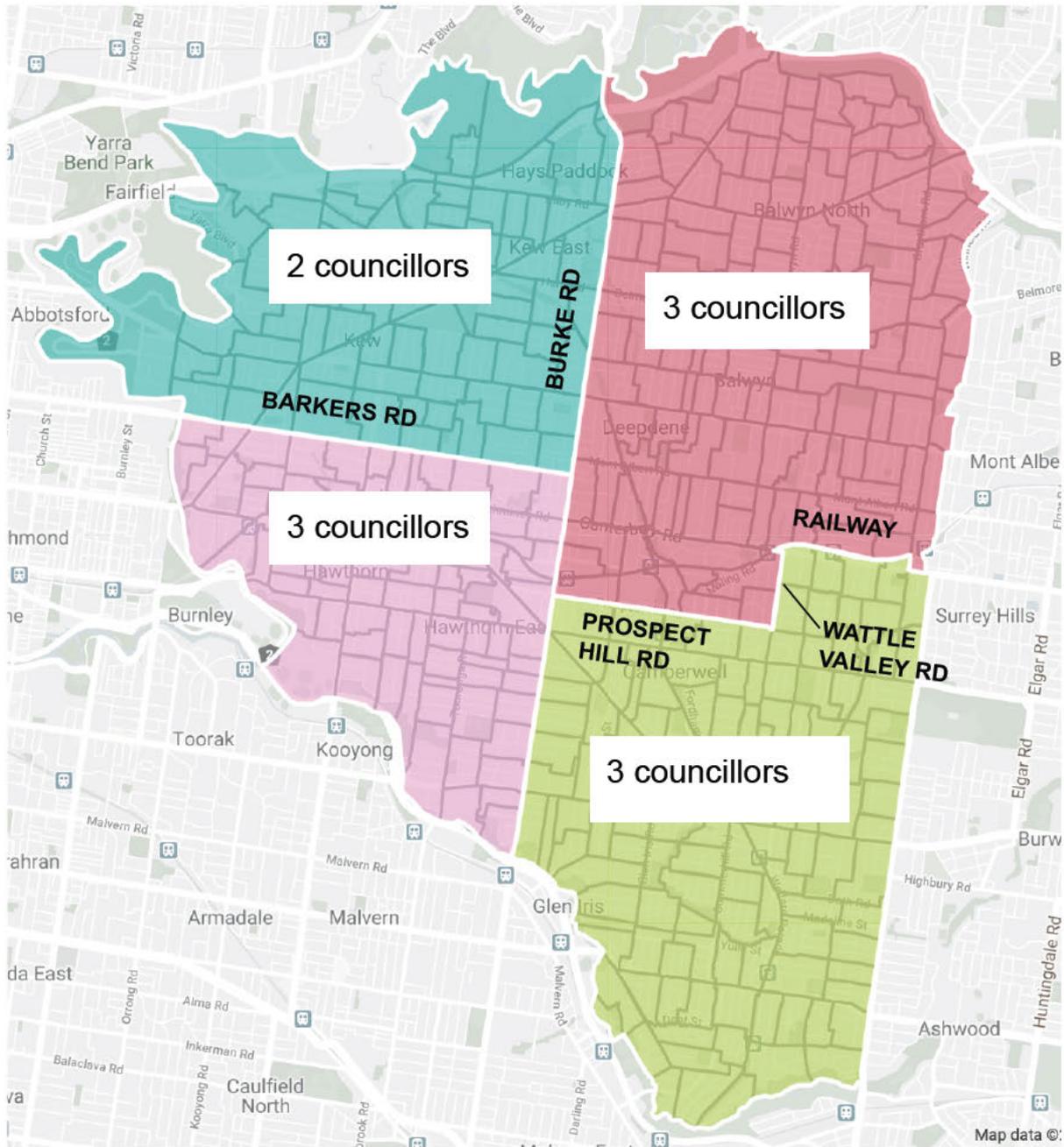
Suggested wards

Using the Boundary Builder tool, I have created this suggested model of four wards electing 11 councillors. My model unites suburbs and communities of interest as much as possible while ensuring clear and simple boundaries based off major roads and rail lines.

It should be noted that the names I used here are placeholders.

Kew and Kew East have a suitable population to elect two councillors, so it makes sense to join them in a single ward. Hawthorn and Hawthorn East, when joined with three SA1 areas in far-western Glen Iris, have enough residents to elect three councillors and remain significantly under quota (to account for the massive population growth occurring around the Glenferrie precinct). Ashburton is joined with Glen Iris, Camberwell and parts of Canterbury and Surrey Hills to form a southern ward electing three

councillors, while Balwyn, Balwyn North, Deepdene and the remainder of Canterbury and Surrey Hills makes up the final ward with three councillors also.



Ward	Councillors ⓘ	Voters	Deviation ⓘ
South-East Ward ✎	- 3 +	37,548	+3.24% 🗑️
North-West Ward ✎	- 2 +	24,822	+2.37% 🗑️
South-West Ward ✎	- 3 +	33,329	-8.36% 🗑️
North-East Ward ✎	- 3 +	37,658	+3.54% 🗑️
Total	- 11 +	133,357	

Ward names

I think that this review is a very good opportunity to change Boroondara's ward names. 'Boroondara' means 'where the ground is thickly shaded' in the Woiwurrung language, so I think the best names for our wards should be botanical, taken from the local Aboriginal languages, Woiwurrung (north) and Bunurong (south). I am not qualified to suggest names of this nature.

A final note

Many submissions that you receive will undoubtedly be the production of Boroondara's numerous resident action groups. I obviously support their right to have their say. However, I object to their positioning as representatives of "all" Boroondara residents and would counter by saying that their constituency is a small, older and far more conservative group than the Boroondara population as a whole. I hope that you will bear this in mind when considering all received submissions.