

Victorian Electoral Commission. Local Council Electoral Representation Review. Boroondara City Council. February 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the regular electoral representation review of the City of Boroondara that the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is required to conduct under the Victorian Local Government Act 1989.

My Position

I support the concepts of multi member wards and proportional representation as the basis for electing councilors to the City of Boroondara. I consider this approach:

- leads to a more democratic result by better reflecting the demographic diversity and spread of interests and values of local residents
- encourages increased participation by local residents in the electoral process
- creates a better understanding by residents of local government and the issues it is required to manage.

I have lived in the City of Boroondara for around 15 years and have voted in all the local government elections held during that time. I previously lived in an area where multi member electorates and proportional representation applied. In my experience, that approach worked considerably better than that which applies in the City of Boroondara in its capacity to reflect the diversity of the residents and their spread of interests. Campaigns were significantly more lively and debates around policies better informed than they ever are in Boroondara where elections are viewed by many as a tiresome duty with little relevance to people's everyday lives.

Boroondara's growing democracy deficit

During the time that I have lived in this municipality, I have seen a decline in the level of democracy that applies to local government in this City. This is apparent in a number of ways especially in the operation of Council meetings where:

- public question time has been severely circumscribed in recent years with requirements that have the effect of limiting the number and nature of questions a person can make at a meeting;
- there is a striking lack of debate occurring in meetings where votes are usually unanimously in support of recommendations put forward in agenda papers prepared by council officers;
- while the minutes for each council meeting are available on the Council's website, they are not easily accessible nor are they particularly informative about the factors influencing specific decisions or how the various councilors voted on motions or the reasons behind their vote.

In its submission, the Council points to the high satisfaction levels within the community regarding council decisions. I am concerned that this may be a measure more relevant to decisions taken generally within the context of the council operations and provides

little insight into how the community regards its councillors. There is no indication on the number of decisions taken by Councillors compared to those taken by council officers or how this ratio compares to other councils. It is likely that multi-member wards with proportional representation would ensure that a higher number of decisions are taken by Councillors rather than officers.

Council Consultative Processes

Boroondara claims that it will consult widely on what the local community wants to see happen with respect to this review.

... it will be of critical importance that Council ensure the community is fully engaged in the process and well informed. Appropriate provision has been made in the 2018/2019 Council budget for a community engagement program. Preliminary discussions with councillors have commenced on the ERR and the general feedback from councillors indicated a preference for a single member ward structure as the most suitable structure for BCC.¹

... The costs of the community engagement program are not known and it is anticipated that these costs will not exceed \$30,000.²

I note that mention of the review appeared in the Boroondara Bulletin of March 2019, the Boroondara News of 21 February and updated on 1 March. There were no recent media releases or mentions in the mayoral blog of the topic. The council meeting at which the Council's submission was considered was notified in a Public Notice on 28 February.

This suggests to me a rather perfunctory attempt at community consultation on this matter. I see it more as a placebo whereby the Council is seen to be doing consultation without any substantive effort to determine the community's views. In its agenda paper to the Council meeting at which the proposed submission was considered, the officer writing the paper states:

*Electoral Structure for Boroondara
Councillors have informally indicated their preference for a single member ward structure, as the most suitable structure for effective representation of their constituents.³*

I am unaware of any active campaign that was undertaken by Councillors to justify their ability to communicate to the officer that people in their ward supported single member

¹ <https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-02/7.10-Electoral-Representation-Review-Proposed-In-Principle-Council-Position.pdf>

² *ibid*

³ <https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-03/3.1%20Boroondara%20City%20Councils%20Proposed%20Preliminary%20Submission%20to%20the%20Victorian%20Electoral%20Commission%20%28VEC%29%20Electoral%20Representation%20Review%20for%20Boroondara%20City%20Council.pdf>

wards. I was never approached by my local Councillor to determine what I thought nor am I aware of anybody else being contacted.

This rather limited consultation exercise illustrates the low level of active democracy that applies in the City of Boroondara. I believe that more active measures for community consultation need to be implemented and that there would be greater incentive for this to happen if there were multi-member wards. One method I would support would be regular ward meetings conducted by my local Councillor.

Demographic Factors

In its submission, the City of Boroondara notes that while population in this area is not growing as rapidly as many other areas of Melbourne, the population in some wards is relatively stable; some wards are losing voters rapidly; and some wards are gaining voters rapidly. Rather than regarding this an argument for single members wards, I believe that it supports the need for multi-member wards which would provide greater flexibility to cope with changing numbers and increased sustainability of the ward boundaries to accommodate these shifts in population.

Conclusion

I recommend that the Victorian Electoral Commission support the implementation of multi-member wards using proportional representation for electing Councillors to the City of Boroondara.

Joy Mettam

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