

VEC Representation and Subdivision Review
Boroondara City Council
Preliminary Submission – 12 March 2019

To Whom It May Concern,

We are writing in support of multi-councillor wards in the City of Boroondara. We believe a proportional representation system is the most democratic way to represent our community. Multi-councillor wards would encourage a greater number and more diverse range of candidates to run for election providing more choice for the community and larger wards would drive greater accountability of councillors across the whole Municipality.

We do not believe that the single-councillor ward system adequately represents the local community. Currently, when a councillor withdraws from the decision-making process based on conflict-of-interest, for example, their ward is left without representation. During a recent experience with this situation, our ward, Solway, was left with no voice and at the whim of councillors with no connection or accountability to our local community at all. This was reflected in the dismissive tone of many of the councillors during a public consultation process plagued with transparency issues and that was seemingly designed to minimise public awareness. Lack of representation, and the apparent lack of care from some councillors during public engagement, caused a great deal of resentment of Boroondara Council in our local community along with a sense of hopelessness at having no representation, no voice, no-one in our corner to counter-balance the Council line that councillors were fed. A core tenet of a democracy is the right of the people to have a representative in Government. With the single-ward system our ward had none. Having several councillors representing a ward will make it unlikely that a ward is left without representation during debate relating to contentious issues that affect a community.

Boroondara Council wish for the status quo to remain. It is argued that councillors are up-to-date with Municipality wide issues and that if they need to be better informed on an issue they are able to speak to officers. Our experience was that many councillors who were unaccountable to our ward relied exclusively on Council information prioritising it above community engagement. Councillors provide a bridge between the community and Council. The Executive and officers under the Executive's direction have an agenda and a vested interest in seeing their proposals supported by councillors. To rely on their views and information that are biased in favour of their proposal introduces bias into decision-making, particularly when a ward has no representative to provide a balanced counter-argument or evidence-based facts. We firmly believe that a system of multi-councillor wards is fairer and that larger wards will deliver greater accountability requiring councillors to be better engaged across the whole Municipality.

We strongly support the election of 11 councillors rather than 10 so that votes can't be tied thereby requiring the Mayor to vote twice - it is undemocratic regardless of the frequency with which it may or may not occur.

An argument used against multi-councillor wards is that it would increase the likelihood of political affiliations and block voting. Political affiliations already exist in the current system. Greater opportunity for election in multi-councillor wards would encourage a greater number and more diverse range of candidates to run for Council providing the community with more choice than is currently available.

We also firmly believe that there should be a cap on the number of terms that councillors can serve. Having the same councillors serve for extended periods creates the opportunity for relationships to be developed with influential individuals and groups whose needs are then prioritised over those of the community. We believe this can lead to a disconnection from the local community; instead the focus becomes the working relationship with the Council Executive and other individuals / groups including relationships of a political persuasion.

We wish to make a complaint about the manner in which Boroondara City Council are promoting this review. Boroondara has a post on their Facebook page informing the community of this review by directing them to request a single-councillor system. They are giving the impression that multi-councillor wards will destroy local representation – their slogan is ‘Keep Boroondara Local’. It is a misleading argument. Councillors for any ward can already reside anywhere in the Municipality and no councillor is ‘local’ to their entire ward, with some ward boundaries bridging neighbouring suburbs and disparate geographical hotspots. When councillors are elected to represent a ward they are required to be accountable to the entire ward. If they are not, the likelihood is they will not be re-elected. In a multi-councillor system, even if all councillors resided in a similar locale this would not preclude them from treating their ward fairly because the key is accountability.

A democracy requires accountability and adequate representation. The present system in the City of Boroondara often delivers neither.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Talbot and Suzette Miller

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