

Christopher A. Webster

Submission Re: Local Council Representation Review, Boroondara City Council

To the Victorian Electoral Commission,

I am a lifelong citizen of the Boroondara City Council ('the Council') and am submitting this document in support of selecting the VEC's preferred option, Option A. For the reasons detailed below, I strongly believe that changing the structure of the Council to four, multi-councillor, wards is the best option for ensuring a truly representative and responsible council that is responsive to the needs of all citizens. To be clear, this means that I am in favour of having four wards, comprising of three wards electing three councillors and one ward electing two councillors, comprising a total of eleven councillors. The reasons for my support of option A are enclosed in my submission below and I hope they are of use to the VEC when making its final decision.

The most pressing reason in favour of altering the Council's structure is the need for greater representation in the diversity of views within the Boroondara community. At Federal and State elections, citizens within the Council area have voted for a diverse range of candidates representing a range of parties. Although the Liberal Party continues to be the most popular choice for Council citizens at these elections, there remains a significant proportion of voters preferencing the Australian Labor Party, Greens and independents within Boroondara. Furthermore, at the 2018 Victorian State Election, voters in the Electoral Districts of Box Hill, Burwood and Hawthorn, which correspond to much of the area of the Council, along with the Electoral Division of Kew, all elected Labor candidates. However, at present due to the spreading of these voters across the council area, Liberal aligned councillors continue to comprise a disproportionate share of the council representation.

The disproportionate share of representation skewed in favour of one party is due to the flaw of the current single member ward system, contained in Option C, and is best illustrated by way of example. If candidates from party A receive 55% of the votes across all wards and candidates from parties B and C and independent candidates receive the remaining 45% of the vote, only candidates from party A will be elected to the council. This current system therefore does not allow for representation of the views of people who voted in favour of parties B and C and independent candidates. This system, currently proposed under option C, is therefore failing to represent the views of a significant proportionate of the electorate who vote in favour of different candidates. As

such, to ensure that all communities of interest of Council citizens are represented, a different method of representation is required and this is why Option A is preferable to Option C.

The current structure of the council and lack of representation of views has further flow on effects on Council representation. The lack of diversity in those elected to Council thus effects the scope of discussion when matters are under debate because one particular viewpoint often dominates council discussion and does not adequately allow for differences of opinion. On key matters, the Council has frequently diminished the concerns of many citizens in regards to the environment, parkland and planning because of a tendency to favour views that align with councillors. By increasing the likelihood of a range of councillors being elected, the council will most likely better represent more communities of interest that currently do not have a voice in council chambers.

The current system, under Option C, further exacerbates this issue if a councillor disagrees with their constituent regarding a particular matter and declines to advocate for their position at council or the councillor has a conflict in a matter under debate or is absent and therefore does not take part in the debate or vote. By ensuring multiple Councillors are able to advocate for a particular constituent, or group of constituents, there is a greater likelihood that the constituent(s) will be heard rather than ignored because of a disagreement with the Councillor or because the Councillor cannot take part in the debate. As such Option A is superior to Option C and B in this regard.

Furthermore, because of the reduced likelihood of success when competing against incumbent or Liberal aligned candidates under Option C, individuals who might otherwise consider contesting a local election are discouraged from doing so because of a perception that campaigning and the real and associated costs of doing so will not be worthwhile as candidates face a disadvantage, even though trying to represent views of a significant portion of the community.

This lack of candidates often means elections for council are fairly minimal with few candidates and little time spent consulting the community and trying to win votes by ensuring citizens believe the councillor will represent them. To illustrate this, I reside in the Maling ward and, being 26 years of age, have voted in two local elections. In the first of these elections in 2012, two candidates were running whom I had not heard or read about except through the information that arrived from the VEC with my postal ballot. There was very limited information about either candidate publicly available online. At the second election that I voted in, 2016, only one candidate was on the ballot.

The result of this is a consequent lack of public interest in local government and increased apathy towards candidates when voters know that their vote is unlikely to make any difference, if at all, as

was the case in the 2016 election. Increasing the size of the ward and the councillors to be elected as in Option A would thus increase the likelihood that voters would take an interest in local government and that candidates would need to spend more time campaigning in their communities and attracting public interest in Council and the matters within its jurisdiction.

Regarding the boundaries and the likelihood of boundary creep, the proposal for boundaries drawn in Option A are much more satisfactory than Option C. Current boundaries are often confusing due to being divided along minor roads or severing key shopping precincts unnecessarily. Furthermore, population increases in a few of the wards may result in a disproportionate representation of some wards who have fewer voters to their councillor than in other wards if the current system, under Option C, were to remain in place. Increasing the size of the ward areas through Option A will make it clearer to voters who their councillors are and what areas are under their jurisdiction. This will help to maintain the integrity of the communities contained within them, rather than having neighbourhoods split amongst councillors as populations continue to strain electoral boundaries.

This issue is clearly demonstrated by the division of the Balwyn and Terminus¹ shopping centres along Whitehorse Road and shopping centre along Toorak and Camberwell Roads, Camberwell. This division which creates complications for the traders and shoppers who are unsure which councillor to speak to about issues occurring on or around the shopping precincts whilst leading to inconsistent information from councillors about issues arising in the shopping centres. However, this issue is not exclusive to shopping centres with boundaries also creating unnecessary confusion in residential areas dividing suburbs along inappropriate small roads with some suburbs divided between two or even three wards. This issue would be much reduced if the VEC proceeded with Option A.

Finally, I wish to stress that I am an independent voter and not aligned to any party but advocate for greater representation as I believe it will be better for Council and its citizens, rather than to gain any partisan advantage.

Yours sincerely,

Christopher A. Webster.

¹ Terminus Shopping centre referring to the commercial precinct located on the either side of the corner of Union Road and Whitehorse Road in Surrey Hills and Balwyn.