1. Summary:

Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc. considers that Greater Dandenong City Council would be expected to continue to have eleven councillors, and that it should continue to benefit from proportional representation using the single transferable vote (PR-STV). It recognizes that of the current four wards one is a stalemate wards electing two councillors, but that this is probably the best that can be hoped for under current legislation, which provides for a maximum of twelve councillors in a municipality. PRSAV-T Inc. would nevertheless prefer that Greater Dandenong City Council consisted of wards with an odd number of councillors, and that all wards should return the same number of councillors.

The whole number of councillors should remain as an odd number, to avoid tied votes in the Council.

PRSAV-T Inc. recommends against any single-councillor wards.

APPENDIX 1 refers to Victoria’s unimpressive decade-long trial of single-councillor wards.

APPENDIX 2 details some of the disadvantages of single-councillor wards.

An undivided municipality would have some advantages, but would not be practicable for Greater Dandenong because of the large number of candidates that would, or could, appear on the single ballot involved. The manageability of local government elections in Victoria would be greatly improved if Victoria were to follow the lead of the Senate and other Australian jurisdictions that use PR-STV, and its own practice for below-the-line voting for its Legislative Council, and provide for at least partial optional preferential marking of preferences, which it can easily do by altering its Regulation 26.

2. The desirability of multi-councillor wards with PR-STV, as opposed to single-councillor wards:

2.1 PR-STV works far better in districts with an odd, rather than an even number of councillors:

PRSAV-T Inc. urges the review not to recommend any electoral district with an even number of councillors to be elected. Districts electing an even number of councillors are most unsatisfactory, as they flout the important democratic principle that a majority view should be represented by a majority of elected councillors, and they can lead to stalemates in the representation of the ward.

If a two-councillor ward were to be recommended, for example, the serious anomaly may arise that, in that ward, one candidate or group might win 65% of the vote and another just 35%, yet the two groups would still have equal representation under proportional representation. Unfortunately four-councillor wards have been recommended for several municipalities in the earlier round of representation reviews. In those wards, a minority group with just on 40% of the vote will be able to achieve equal representation with a majority group achieving just under 60% of the vote.

Only by having an odd number of councillors elected in each ward can the important democratic principle that majority support should lead to majority representation be maintained.
2.2 Wards should be multi-councillor, as many as possible with the same number of councillors:
Arrangements of wards with differing numbers of councillors are intrinsically anti-democratic, as they have different quotas for election in their distinct components, and will result in too much attention being given to where various boundaries are set out, at the expense of a community-oriented spirit. They are also very confusing to electors, and have led to considerable inconsistency across the State.

*Lack of parity in the quotas for election makes it easier to be elected in one of the four wards. That is an undesirable feature that can induce candidates to stand in a particular ward just for their convenience.*

PRSAV-T Inc. supports Greater Dandenong City Council continuing to have 11 councillors elected by PR-STV, but it opposes the use of any single-councillor wards.

Geoffrey Goode
Secretary
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.
APPENDIX 1 – Victoria’s unsuccessful trial of single-councillor wards:

The long and generally widespread wisdom of avoiding single-councillor districts:
Single-councillor districts are, and have been, very little used worldwide, certainly in the English-speaking democracies. The first election in Australia for any level of government, preceding elections for parliaments, was a municipal election, which was for Adelaide City Council in 1840. That pioneering Australian election was held with multi-councillor wards, and was the first use of proportional representation (PR) for the election of a public body in the world. Since then, consistent with long-standing and continuing world practice, multi-councillor districts have nearly always applied for all municipal elections in all the States and Territories of Australia, except for the gratuitous introduction, mainly in Victoria, and only for some of its councils, of single-councillor wards in the mid-1990s.

Victoria’s clumsy initial introduction of triennial elections without proportional representation:
Until Victoria’s neighbouring states - New South Wales, South Australia, and Tasmania - adopted proportional representation as the prevalent system in their municipal electoral districts, which were, and still are, all multi-councillor districts, they generally conducted winner-take-all elections for one of the three councillor positions in each ward annually in rotation. Those neighbouring states all abandoned such annual elections in the 20th Century by changing to a system of general elections with multi-councillor districts with proportional representation being the prevailing system. When Victoria abandoned such annual elections, it not only failed to retain multi-councillor districts throughout, resulting in many single-councillor wards, but it also retained for its remaining multi-councillor wards - by default owing to opposition to proportional representation by the then Opposition-dominated Legislative Council - the winner-take-all system that had been used for counting Senate elections from 1919 until it was discredited and replaced by the present quota-preferential system of proportional representation in 1948.

Unable to choose PR, Victorian councils decided to choose the lesser of two evils:
Because that winner-take-all multi-councillor system was as unrepresentative and lopsided as its 1919-46 Senate counterpart, many amalgamated councils had little choice but to seek some slightly improved diversity by preferring the newly-imposed single-councillor wards. The abhorrently unrepresentative nature of both the winner-take-all Senate systems used prior to 1949 is demonstrated by the extraordinary fact of the five Senate elections, those of 1910, 1917, 1925, 1934 and 1943, where 100% of the senators elected for all States were of the same party. Of course such a silly outcome has not occurred since 1948.

Since that unfortunate and short-lived period when all that was available were two winner-take-all systems, with one being distinctly worse than the other, Victoria now has the far more satisfactory and representative system of multi-councillor wards with quota-preferential proportional representation.

That undesirable winner-take-all system for multi-councillor wards is no longer available under the present Local Government Act 1989, which fortunately now requires that polls in multi-councillor districts must be counted on a proportional representation basis only.
APPENDIX 2 – Some of the disadvantages of single-councillor wards:

**Single-councillor wards minimize voters’ choices, yet maximize candidates’ choice of voters:**
With single-councillor systems, the voters’ choice of candidates is reduced to the minimum possible, for a given total number of candidates overall, but the candidates’ choice of which ward to contest is maximized. With an undivided Council, the voters’ choice of candidates, for a given total number of candidates overall, is maximized by comparison with single-councillor wards, and the candidates’ choice of which ward to contest is minimized, as is their ability to avoid scrutiny by a wider electorate.

*The electoral system should emphasize as much as practicable the importance of letting voters choose their candidates, rather than that of letting candidates choose their voters. The choice of candidates open to voters should be arranged so that it is the maximum practicable, and candidates should face, and be electorally assessed by, a wider cross-section of the municipality they make decisions for.*

**Single-councillor wards with incumbents elected unopposed facilitate unopposed succession:**
Once a councillor has been able to be elected unopposed, particularly if consecutive unopposed elections have been involved, a notorious weakness of the single-councillor ward system can be utilized by that councillor when he or she eventually chooses not to contest the next election.

Such retiring councillors do not have to give, and often do not give, any public notice or even suggestion, prior to the nomination deadline, of their private decision that they will not be maintaining their past practice of nominating for another term. The public is lulled into the misconception that the councillor will probably be nominating again. What happens is that the retiring councillor discreetly chooses not to nominate, and quietly encourages a protégé to nominate at a few minutes before the deadline. That scenario is far less likely in a multi-councillor ward as explained in the point just above.

*Once that surreptitious unopposed transition is a fait accompli, the ward in question soon finds to its surprise that it has a new councillor that hardly anybody realized would be so effortlessly installed.*

**Single-councillor ward boundary location has an undue influence on representation:**
Setting and adjusting the intricate and cumulatively long boundaries for seven single-councillor wards is a contentious, time-consuming and expensive task. No internal boundaries are needed for an undivided municipality, compared with at least six for seven single-councillor wards. Few electors know the boundaries of their ward, and few councillors, including Mayors, know the boundaries of wards other than their own. The resources needed for boundary and ward size control and maintenance can be used for more productive purposes.

It has long been recognized, that with single-councillor wards, even where the number of electors in each is as equal as possible, variations in the positioning of boundaries between wards can alter the overall result of polls without any change having taken place in the way electors vote. The excellent U.S. on-line adaptation of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia’s “Gerrymander Wheel”, accessible at www.prsa.org.au/history.htm#gerrymander demonstrates that. The reason for that is that boundaries between single-councillor wards of a particular shape can in many circumstances just manage to amalgamate a bare majority where a different configuration would not. It has long been called “gerrymandering” when done deliberately, but it is just as effective when it happens as a by-product of impartial boundary-setting. The remedy is to have fewer unnecessary boundaries, as multi-councillor ward arrangements facilitate.
‘Dummy candidates’ are a single-councillor ward device that is of little use in an undivided Council:
Single-councillor wards using preferential voting are very much more vulnerable to manipulation by the use of so-called ‘dummy candidates’. These are candidates that do not expect or wish to be elected, but that are encouraged to stand for election by more serious candidates in the hope that they will garner first preference votes that the more serious candidate might not expect to get. The hope is that those votes will, on the exclusion of the ‘dummy candidates’, be transferred to the serious candidate, and that there will be enough of such votes to produce an absolute majority for the serious candidate, and thus achieve his or her election.

Proportional representation using the single transferable vote is far less conducive to the fielding of ‘dummy candidates’. The reason for that is because, unlike preferential voting in single-councillor wards, where the only type of vote transfer that can occur is the exclusion of minor candidates, there is an extra stage in the transfer process at the vote count, which takes priority over the transfer of votes from excluded candidates. That extra, prior stage is the transfer of surplus votes from candidates that gain more than a quota of first preference votes. Transfer of votes from excluded candidates occurs in PR counts, but it is not the only transfer, and it occurs only after transfer of surplus votes, or if there are no surplus votes.

As several councillors are to be elected in a PR count, it is much more likely that at least one will gain a quota of first preference votes than it is that any one of many candidates in a single-councillor ward will gain an absolute majority of first preference votes. Once a candidate in a PR count has gained a quota of first preference votes there must then be a transfer of surplus votes before any transfers arising from exclusion can occur. Unless a single candidate in a single-councillor ward can gain an absolute majority of first preference votes and be elected forthwith, such a count has to proceed to the transfer of excluded candidates, which involves transfer, at full value, of the votes of the lowest-polling candidates, often ‘dummy candidates’.

It is most significant that transfers of surplus votes are, by definition, from candidates that have secured election early in the count, before the count is completed, i.e. serious candidates rather than ‘dummy candidates’. Such transfers are derived from that candidate’s total parcel of ballot-papers, whereas the only transfers available in single-councillor counts are necessarily those transfers arising from exclusions of candidates. Such exclusions are initiated in the negative circumstance of no candidate being elected, and are derived from the ballot-papers of the candidate with the lowest prospect of being elected, viz. the candidate with the lowest progress total in the poll, which is where ‘dummy candidates’ usually appear.

Transfers of surplus votes are positive in outcome as they give effect to the support for a particular point of view that is large enough to have already achieved at least one elected representative and to contribute towards the election of another. By contrast, transfers arising from exclusions of candidates, although necessary and justified, are of lower priority, but not value, as reflected in the rules for a quota-preferential proportional representation count, because they are derived from the smallest aggregations of opinion, rather than the larger aggregations represented by parcels of votes exceeding a quota.

Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc. is very pleased that the review process recommended PR systems for a number of the councils reviewed in recent rounds. PRSAV-T Inc. remains of the view that it would be highly desirable for Local Government in Victoria to move towards a more consistent electoral system, and it looks forward to electoral arrangements in Greater Dandenong City that empower voters and leave all candidates satisfied that community views are fairly reflected in the representation determined after each poll.

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