To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my dismay at the proposal to move away from multimember wards for the City of Greater Dandenong as part of the Local Government Bill 2019. I strongly believe that the move undermines local democracy by making it much harder for a variety of voices to be elected to council. Whatever one's political persuasion, I think it is clearly good for democracy for a local council to have a diversity of political parties/ opinions represented. Multimember wards have allowed Greater Dandenong to elect Labor, Liberal and Green councillors and thereby insure that both majority and minority political opinions in the area are represented on council and heard in the community.

Multimember wards are not only good for party pluralism, they are also to my mind an absolute key plank in helping build the participation of people from non-Anglo backgrounds in politics - a must if Australia is to remain a robust democracy under conditions of increasing cultural diversity. In Greater Dandenong, for example, we have councillors of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Italian, Albanian, Lebanese and Anglo heritage. Moving to single member wards would mean that in each ward candidates from different ethnic groups would be fighting against each other and it would be extremely difficult for ethnic groups that are sizeable but dispersed throughout the municipality to elect a councillor that speaks their language and understands particular issues and concerns of this group. A hallmark of Melbourne - and something that distinguishes itself from Sydney - is that areas that have large migrant populations overwhelmingly have highly diverse populations. In Greater Dandenong, 64% of people speak one of 154 languages other than English at home (LOTIE; 2016 Australian Census) - including 14 LOTE's spoken by over 2000 residents. It is already highly challenging to ensure that the very diverse communities of interest who reside and work in Greater Dandenong have the opportunity to have their democratic say. Forcing each small suburb to have a single representative on council strikes me as a highly regressive step.

From a practical point of view, the move away from multimember wards appears to disregard the benefit they can serve in encouraging members for a ward to work together across party/ ideological/ ethnic lines to achieve good outcomes for their ward ratepayers. In single member wards each councillor is accountable to a different group of ratepayers; thus effectively competing against all other councillors for budgetary priory for their ward. Again this incentivises factionalisation and potentially even corruption as a strategy for ensuring that one's own constituents come out on top. In multimember wards by contrast it is easier to build a coalition to advocate on behalf of a pressing local issue - since all ward members will be invested in achieving a good outcome. Multimember wards also encourage councillors to build different types of coalitions within the council - e.g. on party lines, wards lines, and potentially other identity lines such as gender or ethnicity. There is also the practical issue too that many decisions taken by council affect the municipality as a whole, not just a small geographic local area, so having larger wards encourages members to think and vote in the best interest of a wide constituency.
Finally I have concerns that single member wards will further erode the general public's trust and interest in local government. There is already a community perception that local government is small-scale and basically irrelevant (notwithstanding the very important work councillors actually do), and moving to small single member wards only confirms this view. By making it harder for a diversity of views to be represented on council it will arguably strengthen community distrust in councils and only strengthen incentives for candidates to form opaque preference-swapping cabals in an effort to be the single member who triumphs.

I note that the views I have expressed in this email are widely shared by local councils that currently have multimember wards. Please respect our voices and do not take away our right to organise councils this way, when it is the will of our community.

regards

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