

The Hon Daniel Andrews MP
Premier of Victoria
daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

The Hon Shaun Leane
Minister for Local Government
OfficeMinLeane@ecodev.vic.gov.au

Dear Premier and Minister for Local Government

Local Government Electoral Systems

We wish to express our concern over provisions in the Local Government Act 2020 relating to electoral systems in local government. This new legislation gives the Local Government Minister significantly expanded powers to alter the existing arrangements and to replace multi-member representation with single ward systems. We see this as a backward step that will lead to an unacceptable decline in democracy in local government.

This letter is on behalf of Lighter Footprints, a non-partisan community group of concerned residents from Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities who are working to achieve stronger government action on climate change. We see local government as an important player in responding to this crisis.

We support multi member electoral systems because they have the potential to increase democracy at the local level. A well-functioning democracy has representatives that reflect the diverse demographic and attitudinal characteristics of its residents. Our stance is based to a large degree on our experience of the City of Boroondara which demonstrates the weakness of single member wards to adequately reflect the nature and views of a large proportion of the people who live in this area.

Greater diversity amongst our elected representatives would:

- contribute to a more democratic council by enabling the representation of a wider range of views and facilitating a richer debate in council deliberations.
- lead to higher quality decision making that better reflects the views of the community;
- enhance the Council's capability to deal with the increasingly complex matters that fall within its responsibilities.
- meet the urgent need to attract a more diverse range of councillors with a wider range of skills and expertise;
- make the job of individual councillors more manageable so they can work together with other councillors in that ward to respond to the needs of their residents.

Boroondara is one of very few municipal councils currently elected under a single member system. Elections here are anodyne affairs where there is virtually no clash of policy ideas or approach. With very few exceptions, the Council comprises people from quite similar backgrounds and holding conservative attitudes on most issues. This has created a Council with a strong desire to conserve the status quo and often unable or unwilling to explore new ways to address problems.

This failure to create a council that reflects the full range of views and attitudes within our community has significant implications for decision making. The lack of any effective opposition to advocate for the range of views that exist in our community is immediately apparent at any council meeting.

The conduct of business at council meetings is quite perfunctory with little debate and there is a heavy reliance on agenda papers prepared by officials. Motions are too often passed by unanimous vote suggesting a high degree of caucusing amongst councillors prior to the meeting. En bloc votes with no debate on a number of unrelated matters, including performance reporting happen regularly.

This absence of any effective opposition is reinforced by very limited opportunities for residents to question their councillors. Public questions at meetings are strictly limited to matters on the agenda, for which the questioner has already had contact with the Council and are restricted to no more than 11 in any 12-month period. There is also an almost total absence of ward meetings within Boroondara.

We see this as a deficit in the democratic processes that should apply at all levels of government. In Boroondara, it has meant that those with strong commercial interests such as property owners and developers, private schools and professional sporting bodies are regularly given a more sympathetic hearing than those seeking solutions that meet the needs of the resident.

We are aware that many residents in Boroondara are calling for stronger action by local government for measures that respond to the challenge of climate change. A recent petition to the Council calling for action on climate change contained nearly 4000 signatures. With the exception of two or three, current councillors have not shown much awareness of their potential role in this area nor willingness to provide leadership in developing an adequate response to the climate emergency. We believe that multi-member wards and proportional representation would attract candidates who would be able to fill this gap in the Council's capability and outlook.

The latest iteration of the Local Government Act followed extensive community consultations over several years. At no time during these consultations was there any support expressed amongst the Victorian community for the adoption of a single member system.

The announcement of the plan to implement single member wards by the former Minister for Local Government was greeted with strong opposition from many quarters. This included the Municipal Association of Victoria, two thirds of Victorian Councils, local government women's advocates and members of the minister's own mayoral advisory panel and individual residents.

We call on you to suspend the implementation of single member ward electoral systems and to undertake a review of these provisions in the Local Government Act 2020 to remove this threat to democratic government in our local councils.

Yours sincerely

Carolyn Ingvarson
Convenor
Lighter Footprints Inc

15 Faversham Road
Canterbury Vic 3126

M: 0411 115 186

17 July 2020