

Victorian Electoral Commission. Local Council Electoral Representation Review. Boroondara City Council.

Response to VEC's Preliminary Report

Lighter Footprints welcomes the release on 10 April 2019 by The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) of its Preliminary Report as part of its regular electoral representation review of the City of Boroondara; and appreciates the further opportunity to comment on this matter.

Lighter Footprints is a growing and influential group of concerned residents (now around 2000) from the Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities who came together in 2006 to see what we could do about the serious challenge of climate change. Our community recognises that climate change has been scientifically demonstrated for some years, and the extent of the challenges leads us to be impatient for effective action.

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Our position

We note that three options are being considered by the VEC:

- Option A (preferred option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from four wards (three three-councillor wards and one two-councillor ward).
- Option B (alternative option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from five wards (four two-councillor wards and one three-councillor ward).
- Option C (alternative option) Boroondara City Council consist of eleven councillors elected from eleven single-councillor wards.

We support VEC's preferred option (Option A) on the grounds that this option would:

- provide greater representation for the large community of interest that exists within the City of Boroondara on the need for action to address climate change at all levels of government including local government;
- address the democratic deficit that currently exists in Boroondara around participation by the local community in the choose of its representatives and involvement in the decision making by the Council at the councillor and official level; and

- expand the capacity of our local representatives to make high quality decisions on the increasingly complex matters being considered at the local government level.

While we prefer Option A, Option B would be acceptable. We consider Option A better because it would be more durable over the longer term in response to shifts in population and demographics.

We oppose Option C on the grounds that this approach is no longer adequate to handle the complex matters now confronting local government. Single member wards may have been sufficient in the days when Council was primarily concerned with local matters such as roads, bridges and rubbish collections and their major source of funds was property rates. These days are long past and councils are now dealing with matters that have implications way beyond the bounds of their local area and with huge budgets where rates are only one of a number of funding sources.

Community of Interest

Lighter Footprints was established in 2006 and since then has grown to become a well recognised and respected organisation in the Boroondara area and beyond. It is a non-partisan group that attracts members from all political persuasions as well as age, gender and economic background. It conducts regular monthly meetings which attract an audience of more than 50 people to hear speakers who are leaders in the intellectual and economic aspects of this topic. It also conducts large regular forums to foster the debate around climate change amongst the general public and is able to fill the Hawthorn Arts Centre with capacity crowds of more than 600 people.

We see the development of Lighter Footprints as an indicator of how important the issue of climate change is to the people of Boroondara. Lighter Footprints has brought people together to share their concerns and to find ways to encourage governments at all levels to take the challenge of climate change seriously.

Under the current single member ward arrangement which focuses on geographical identity, there is little opportunity to stand candidates who reflect this broader community of interest.

Making Boroondara more democratic

Being the level of government closest to where people live and dealing with issues that affect their everyday lives, it would seem that there should be many opportunities for residents to participate more consistently and effectively in the decision making that occurs in Council. And yet this does not apply in Boroondara.

At present, elections in Boroondara are very mild-mannered affairs where there is virtually no clash of ideas or approach. As a consequence, we end up with a council populated to a large degree with people from quite similar backgrounds and with conservative attitudes who have little willingness to explore new ways to address problems and a desire to conserve the status quo. This has meant that property owners

and developers and powerful interests such as the private schools and professional sporting bodies get a much more sympathetic hearing than those seeking a less commercially oriented solution.

Council meetings in Boroondara are generally not well attended by the public unless there is a specific issue affecting a particular neighbourhood or where an individual has an interest in council affairs. 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 often passed by unanimous vote suggesting a high degree of caucusing amongst councillors prior to the meeting. Public questions 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.

Ward meetings are never or very rarely held and it is the very unusual councillor that actually becomes involved in activities in their particular ward or approaches their constituents to determine their views. Special interest groups of residents sponsored by the Council around specific topics seem to have disappeared altogether.

We welcome recent initiatives by the Council to keep the local community better informed of its activities. These include distribution of the Boroondara Newsletter by email and making it available on its website. This newsletter, however, is generally an insubstantial document full of photographs and feel good items. It does little to stimulate participation by the community in discussion about the matters that are being decided by Council.

Another initiative is the greater accessibility to the previous meeting minutes as part of the publication of the agenda papers for the current meeting on the website. The minutes, however, are limited and give no indication of whether any debate occurred or who voted for or opposed specific motions. Such information would be useful in identifying the particular approach of any one councillor as well elucidating the issues affecting the decision taken.

The consultation exercise the Council undertook in late 2016 and early 2017 on the Community Plan for the next 10 years indicated a substantial degree of enthusiasm within the local community to become involved in discussions on council activities. As part of the consultation that the Council outsourced to a private agency, there were 11,845 responses throughout the various stages and in the different forums of the project. The puzzling question is where has all this enthusiasm and involvement disappeared to and why it has not been possible to capture even a small proportion of this energy on a continuing basis.

We consider that a good place to start addressing this democratic deficit would be to introduce multi member wards with proportional representation. Multi member elections would attract a wider, more diverse range of candidates and encourage a more active involvement by voters in choosing the candidate who best represents their interests. This approach would also encourage voters to identify more strongly with their

representative and to maintain a continuing interest in the way they fulfill their responsibilities when in office. The greater diversity of representation created by this approach would also lead to more lively debates within Council and ensure greater transparency in decision making.

Capacity to address the increased complexity of local government

Single member wards may have been adequate in times when the main responsibilities of council were the provision of local infrastructure such as roads and footpaths and services such as rubbish collections and baby health centres and council budgets were much smaller. In more recent times, this approach no longer ensures that councillors have the capability to deal with the growing significance of local government, the increasing interdependency of the three layers of government, the broader remit of municipal responsibilities and the size of council operations.

The increased complexity of local government requires higher quality decision making than that needed when local councils were dealing with much less important matters and much smaller budgets:

- Local government has become an important layer of legislative authority within our community.
- Boroondara has an operating budget and a workforce equivalent to a medium sized to large company.
- Unless councillors are drawn from a wider range of people with a more diverse range of skills and interests, there is the risk that decision making will be influenced unduly by vested interests or left to council officials.

More diverse representation and response to climate change

We believe that local government has become a significant player in the global response to climate change:

- Municipal councils such as Boroondara are being required to adopt the role of first responder to deal with the impacts of extreme weather on local communities and infrastructure. This role will have a significant impact on council budgets and resources.
- Councils also have a range of levers they can use to adapt to and mitigate the effect of climate change. These include facilitating changes in transport away from fossil fuel towards electric vehicles, bicycles and public transport; better management of parklands and increased planting of trees and other vegetation; better management of water including storm water, filtration and wetlands; land planning and building approvals.

We support Option A in particular because we consider it provides the best opportunity to elect councillors that represent the growing community of interest in Boroondara of people concerned with the threat of climate change.

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