

13 July 2023

Electoral Review Advisory Panel Submissions

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We respectfully provide this statement to the Local Council electoral structure review of Horsham Rural City Council.

While this submission does not have the formal endorsement of a Council Resolution, it is signed by 6 of the 7 current HRCC Councillors.

Municipal demographics

The June 2023 Preliminary Report provides some important statistics on the demographic makeup of Horsham Rural City Council. At the 2021 Census, our total population was 20 429 with 16 289 or almost 80% living within the Horsham city boundary (page 11). There are currently 15 753 registered voters (page 13) spread across 4 267km² (page 11).

Currently unsubdivided, it is the responsibility of all Councillors to represent the diverse and divergent views and needs of our entire municipality.

There has been much commentary on the small number of candidates who have nominated for Council over the past few election cycles. This is reflective of the size of the pool and the changed dynamics caused by aggressive social media commentary.

At the 2020 election, the demographics of the 9 candidates were 4 women and 5 men, 6 urban and 3 rural residents including 2 farmers, and an age range from 40 to 80+.

In this Council term, there are 4 urban and 3 rural based Councillors including 2 farmers, confirming that both urban and rural representation is being achieved under the current electoral structure.

HRCC 2015 electoral structure review

The *Final Report 2015 Horsham Rural City Council Electoral Representation Review, 2015* (page 19) found...

The unsubdivided structure suits a council like the Rural City of Horsham, which is focussed on the town, and where the urban and rural areas form a single, interdependent community of interest. The distribution of councillors demonstrates that no part of the municipality is over or under-represented, and that voters do not take candidates' locations into account when they vote. Council elections show a consistent pattern of providing voters with a wide choice without having so many candidates as to confuse voters.

The 2015 VEC recommendation was “*the retention of the current (unsubdivided) structure*”.

While the population of Horsham Rural City has increased, no other significant dynamics have changed within the Horsham Rural City Council municipality.

City of Geelong Commission of Inquiry 2016 concerns about single member wards

The *Commission of Inquiry into Greater Geelong City Council 2016* expressed concern that “lone” Councillor in single member ward created a culture of “my patch” and “turf protection” and found that “*a significant number of Councillors appear to be preoccupied with their individual ward interests rather than the City as a whole*”.

Recommendation 5a...

Replacement of single councillor wards by multi-councillor wards supported by mechanisms to ensure strategic, whole of municipality planning and delivery would strengthen council leadership, corporate behaviour and decision making.

Councillor’s personal concerns with the proposed HRCC ward structure

For the benefit and betterment of our municipal community, it is imperative that the system in place to elect the Councillors to represent the community ensures that the community has the opportunity to select the candidates that they believe will best represent them.

Our current Councillors are engaged with and interact on a regular basis with the many different segments within our community. Giving our community choice in which Councillor they share their concerns is an important element of our democracy.

Urban/rural representation is so important in our municipality with our large geographic area where 80% of our population lives within Horsham’s city boundary.

The Victorian Government have set ambitious diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, experience, etc) targets for the 2024 Council elections and I have concerns that the proposed ward structure will disadvantage and limit the diversity of candidates elected to Horsham Rural City Council.

In the past, there have been challenges in attracting candidates for Council election as we have a small pool of registered voters. Candidates will potentially delay nominating to see which ward would provide them with the best chance of election. Councillors being elected unopposed is not necessarily in the best interests of our community. We believe the community deserves to choose their “best” 7 candidates from a large pool and not single Councillor wards where a candidate could be elected without a contest.

Another concern is that there are numerous examples across the state where Councillors do not live in the ward that they are elected to represent as this is not a statutory obligation or requirement.

Under the proposed single member ward structure, as noted on page 13 of the Preliminary Report, an individual HRCC Councillor would be answerable to only 2250 municipal. The proposed structure allows for a 10% deviation, but we question the unnecessary cost that will be borne by Council’s ratepayers to regularly review and realign the ward boundaries due to growth. For residents who are impacted by different ward boundaries, this will be confusing, unnecessary and not productive.

As noted in the 2016 City of Geelong Commission of Inquiry, single member wards encourage “turf protection” and “my patch” Councillor behaviour. Councillors making decisions to ensure personal re-election and not necessarily in the best interests of the entire municipality has been found to be a significant risk with the single member ward structure.

While the *Local Government Act 2020* s18(2)(c) states that “a Councillor must consider the diversity of interests and needs of the municipal community”, unfortunately, for a Councillor to be found to have breached this provision of the Act, it must be dealt with as a code of conduct matter not as an offence under the Act.

Councillors are also concerned that under this single member ward model, any vacancy will require an expensive by-election rather than the current countback system which imposes another unnecessary election and financial burden on our ratepayers.

We are very concerned that artificially dividing our community into wards will be divisive and will be to the detriment of good governance and cohesion between the Councillor group and the community.

Ward Options

Option 1

This model divides urban Horsham into 5 wards and the rural area is divided into 2 large, east west wards.

Councillors concur with the disadvantages of this model as noted in the Preliminary Report on page 15-6, particularly the unfair burden on the 2 Councillors elected to represent the disparate interests within these rural wards and the difficulty of equal representation in the 5 artificial segments within urban boundary.

Council wants and needs Councillors with diverse backgrounds and life experience at the table to make the best decisions for our entire municipal community. We firmly believe that candidates from diverse backgrounds will be disadvantaged by this model.

Councillors are also concerned that artificially dividing our municipality along the lines of this model will be divisive and not in the best interests of our community.

Option 2

This model divides urban Horsham into 5 wards and the rural area is divided into 2 large, north south wards.

Councillors concur with the disadvantages of this model noted in the Preliminary Report on page 16, particularly the unfair burden on the 2 Councillors elected to represent the disparate interests of the different rural communities in these rural wards and the difficulty of equal representation in the 5 artificial segments within urban boundary.

Council wants and needs Councillors with diverse backgrounds and life experience at the table to make the best decisions for our entire municipal community. We firmly believe that candidates from diverse backgrounds will be disadvantaged by this model.

Councillors are also concerned that artificially dividing our municipality along the lines of this model will be divisive and not in the best interests of our community.

Option 3

This model divides the municipality into “7 slices of pizza”.

Councillors concur with the advantages and disadvantages as noted in the Preliminary Report on page 17. We are particularly concerned that there is the real possibility that no rural resident would be elected via this model.

Council wants and needs Councillors with diverse backgrounds and life experience at the table to make the best decisions for our entire municipal community. We firmly believe that candidates from diverse backgrounds will be disadvantaged by this model.

Councillors are also concerned that artificially dividing our municipality along the lines of this model will be divisive and not in the best interests of our community.

Conclusion

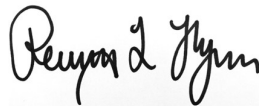
The *Local Government Act 2020* confers on the Minister for Local Government the power under s13(4), (5) and (5A) to specify and publish a notice in the Government Gazette confirming the prescribed constitution of each Council and to amend the regulations referenced in s13(3).

We, the undersigned Horsham Rural City Council Councillors, do not believe that any of the proposed ward structure options will meet the needs of our municipal community and respectfully request that the Minister amends the regulations to permit Horsham Rural City Council to retain our current unsubdivided electoral structure at the 2024 Council election.

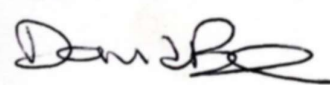
Regards



Cr Robyn Gulline (Mayor)



Cr Penny Flynn (Deputy Mayor)



Cr David Bowe



Cr Les Power



Cr Bob Redden



Cr Ian Ross