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18 April 2023

Mount Alexander Electoral Representation Advisory Panel
VEC
Level 11
530 Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

By email: MountAlexander.ERAPSubmissions@vec.vic.gov.au

Dear Sir / Madam,

Local Council Electoral Structure Review – Mount Alexander Shire Council

Please accept this as Mount Alexander Shire Council's formal submission to the Local Council Electoral Structure Review. It is understood that this submission will be made public.

Council has reviewed the Electoral Representation Advisory Panel's preliminary report and the proposed models and provides the following responses:

Model 1 – Unsubdivided, Seven Councillors

- An unsubdivided electoral structure is not supported and Council strongly disagrees with the arguments made in the preliminary report for this arrangement.
- At the 2020 General Election, all elected Councillors reside within the wards to which they were elected, and this has consistently been the case in Mount Alexander Shire.
- Being unsubdivided would structurally guarantee the possibility of some parts of the Shire not being appropriately represented following each election. It is of particular concern that Councillors from within the greater Castlemaine township could be in the majority as they are far more likely to be widely known than others from within smaller outlying communities. This situation can be substantially avoided through retaining subdivided wards.
- The recent report on the Commission of Enquiry into Moira Shire Council noted that residents in that municipality felt that "their interests were no longer being adequately represented" by the unsubdivided structure. When the structure was last reviewed in 2019, the recommendation from the VEC was to establish 3 wards with 3 Councillors each. This recommendation was not accepted by the then Minister for Local Government, Mr Adam Somyurek. To quote the report (pg. 123):

"Arguments were mounted during the last Local Representation Review of the Shire in 2019 by the VEC that an unsubdivided electoral structure would support the need for all elected

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Councillors to govern in the interests of the whole Shire. Considerable evidence has been provided to the Commission through its community consultations and submissions received that this has not proven to be the case."

Models 2 and 3 – Eight Councillors, Four Wards and Eight Councillors, Eight Wards

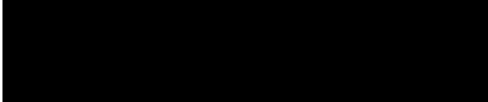
- Council strongly opposes having an even number of Councillors as it:
 - Systemically increases the likelihood of the Mayor needing to use the casting vote, and
 - Increases the possibility of a voting block aligned with the Mayor and/or deal-making with the Mayor.
- In the case of Hepburn Shire Council (our most readily relatable Council), it is noted that it has been offered the option to retain seven Councillors as either subdivided or unsubdivided wards. Given our similarities, it is felt that Mount Alexander Shire should also have the option to have seven wards and seven Councillors.
- The addition of more Councillors should only be in response to a demonstrated shortcoming in the existing seven Councillor representation. Conversely, in the annual Community Satisfaction Survey, Mount Alexander Shire Council is consistently at, or around, the Large Rural Council State-wide averages for its *overall performance, community consultation and engagement, community decisions and overall Council direction*.
- Each additional Councillor would cost the ratepayers at least a further \$50,000 per year to remunerate and support. With no demonstrable argument provided to support this, it is considered a poor use of ratepayer funds in an already highly constrained financial environment.

Preferred Option

- Council has a strong view that the existing number of Councillors, at seven, is correct. While Council also believes that the existing ward arrangements function well, seven Councillors in seven wards is considered an acceptable alternative and meets the requirements of the current Local Government Act.
- It is noted that many of the Councils included in the Panel's comparative table also have seven Councillors.
- Council appreciates that splitting the current Castlemaine Ward into three (as proposed by Council) means that the boundary edges with the outer wards may have to be adjusted slightly. This is strongly preferred over the option of being unsubdivided and/or having an even number of Councillors.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Governance Unit on governance@mountalexander.vic.gov.au

Yours sincerely, 



COUNCILLOR ROSIE ANNEAR
Mayor