

LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTORAL STRUCTURE REVIEW

SURF COAST SHIRE

Number of Councillors

I support the current number of Councillors – nine.

Structure

I support an Unsubdivided Structure

Like many rural municipalities Surf Coast Shire has township pockets of population density sitting within a much larger rural landscape. The population growth along the coastal strip has further exacerbated the population differences between coastal and hinterland.

The primitive, yet long accepted, measure of population as a basis for representation potentially concentrates decision making in a small highly urbanised area of the municipality, and one that does not well engage with, nor well understand the differing values of rural and bushland communities.

This is an issue with lots of emotion because no one wants to feel that they are missing out of their local representation. However, it becomes clear on reading the Fact Sheet that this is a complex issue. In order to achieve the equal number of voters per councillor requires the bulk of councillors to be in those population areas. In fact, based on population alone, Torquay, Jan Juc, Bells Beach and Anglesea would require 6 of the current nine councillors.

One questions whether it is fair or equitable to condemn the rest of the municipality to only three councillors. The diversity is evidenced in the highly engaged coastal community of Aireys Inlet, the beautiful tourist town of Lorne, the productive slopes of the Otways, to the wide open plains to the north where peoples lifestyle and interests are very different. We know that strong communities are built when people see ‘people like themselves’ in decision making positions, rurally dispersed populations deserve nothing less.

A ward structure automatically concentrates the power in the homogenous highly urbanised eastern corner at Torquay, while also splitting the town in some way, ie either a three councillor ward or single councillor wards carve up the town in a way that makes sense only to a map maker, not a citizen who lives in a community. Similarly, single councillor wards carve up Torquay, while across the municipality the placement of lines on paper to achieve numbers divides up communities, would not be based on natural fit of communities of interest nor even on geography given that ridge divides the coastal and hinterland areas.

This primitive numbers game is inequitable in that it provides easy access for urbanised communities (both citizens and councillors) while increasing workload, travel etc for the rural people. I have used the provided Fact Sheet in an attempt to achieve wards of approx. 4000 voters and despite many different attempts it just doesn't work in a practical sense.

In summary, there does not appear to be any way you can ‘cut’ the Surf Coast population to equitably meet the criteria as set out in the Act, either for single councillor nor equal member wards.

This leaves the only reasonable option that of an unsubdivided municipality.

**Electoral structure review - Surf Coast Shire Council - Preliminary Submission
Beth Davidson OAM - Anglesea - 20 February 2023 3:34pm**

As a former councillor, with experience serving in both a three member ward and an unsubdivided council, it was my experience that the unsubdivided worked best.

Firstly, I found that councillors were less parochial. By nature of the model, councillors are accountable to the entire municipality rather than to a small section. I found this encouraged them to take a bigger picture view and to better engage with issues that may have been beyond their previous experience. Better engaged and informed councillors means better decision making!

Additionally, I noticed increased collaboration which started early, ie at campaign time. Astute candidates need to link with others from across the municipality to increase their election opportunities! These relationships formed early assist with difficult decision-making at the Council table.

While some citizens feel disenfranchised when they don't have a dedicated ward councillor, I observed that others felt less constrained and felt free to go to their councillor of choice without being constrained by the fear of upsetting the local member.

The 'rider' in supporting an unsubdivided model is the need for increased education for candidates. For example, candidates need to understand the preferential model of voting and how quotas work in practice. This is particularly important for candidates from the less populous parts of the municipality.

Finally, unsubdivided elections MUST be supported by info on the ballot sheet that indicates the candidates locality – citizens MUST have this information as part of their voting criteria. Its my experience that, rather than driving votes to the population centres, this helps people to spread their votes across the municipality and achieve a fairer outcome than the blunt instrument of the ward structure.

In summary, I find from both personal experience and observation, that an unsubdivided Surf Coast Shire will deliver fairer and more equitable representation than the alternative model of divisions.

I would like the opportunity to be heard by the Panel.

Yours sincerely,



Beth Davidson OAM



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