

## **Submission to the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to reconsider options for Murrindindi Shire Council's Cathedral Ward**

**Submission by** Melinda Evans, Taggerty

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Neither Option 1 nor Option 2 offered for the new ward boundaries for Cathedral Ward in Murrindindi Shire Council area are suitable in that geographically isolated communities have been bound together.

Please *reconsider* both options you have posed for Murrindindi Shire Council ward boundaries affecting the Cathedral Ward.

### **Geospatial concern**

Both options 1 and 2 expand the Cathedral Ward westwards to include communities on the other side of The Black Range State Forest. Option 1 includes the areas of Toolangi and Murrindindi with Cathedral Ward, both of which are not feasibly accessed from the current Cathedral Ward area. Option 2 includes Murrindindi, so it has the same issue. Currently, the Cathedral Ward encompasses the Black Range State Forest, but this area has no residents, so a councillor does not need to visit any constituents there.

By pushing the Cathedral Ward boundary further west to encompass Toolangi or Murrindindi, a councillor based in the current Cathedral Ward would need to drive all the way around the Black Range (there is no feasible option to drive through it), either via Yea (a different ward) or for Toolangi, via Healesville (a different shire council), to visit that community. As noted in Figures 1 and 2, any route to Toolangi takes over an hour and the route to Murrindindi takes near one hour. Furthermore, most of the journey would be inefficiently travelling through areas not in the councillor's electorate. It is not fair to expect a councillor to make a round trip of over two hours to meet up with a small community of voters isolated from the rest of the constituents.



Figure 1. Snip of a Google Map showing the driving options from Taggerty to Toolangi, both taking over one hour.



Figure 2. Snip of a Google Map showing the drive time from Taggerty to Murrindindi

## Representing communities fairly

Unless the two proposed unworkable options offered for Cathedral Ward are changed, I am concerned that either no one will be prepared to stand for election for our ward or only a person desperate to gain office would stand. Even if we are fortunate enough to have excellent candidates stand for election with the proposed boundary change in Cathedral Ward, there is a risk that residents on the western side of the range would not be well represented out of pragmatic necessity - which would be unfair to them. Please do not include either Murrindindi or Toolangi in the Cathedral Ward. Doing so would conceivably affect the chances of quality candidates standing for office in our ward or risk having voters disadvantaged.

## Ward identity

Including either Toolangi or Murrindindi in the Cathedral Ward is not a meaningful option. Communities either side of the Black Range do not naturally interact because there is an entire mountain range in the way. People from the southwest of the Shire do not shop, attend community events or send their children to the schools on the eastern side or vice versa because it is too far to drive. This lack of connection would make the new ward boundary proposals hard to identify, not meaningful to the constituents, and not workable for the councillor.

## Other options

### 1. Include Acheron in Cathedral Ward

Including Acheron in the Cathedral Ward makes sense. Currently, all the villages in Cathedral Ward are connected by the Maroondah Highway, or, in the case of Marysville, an offshoot of it is accessible from both the Narbethong and Buxton ends. Acheron is on the Maroondah Highway just up from Taggerty. Many residents from the two adjacent town areas already mingle and attend events together. By including Acheron in the Cathedral Ward, this would the numbers needed in that ward to bring the voter deviation to within 10% and Cathedral Ward would embrace a community which already aligns with it. Please see Figure 3.

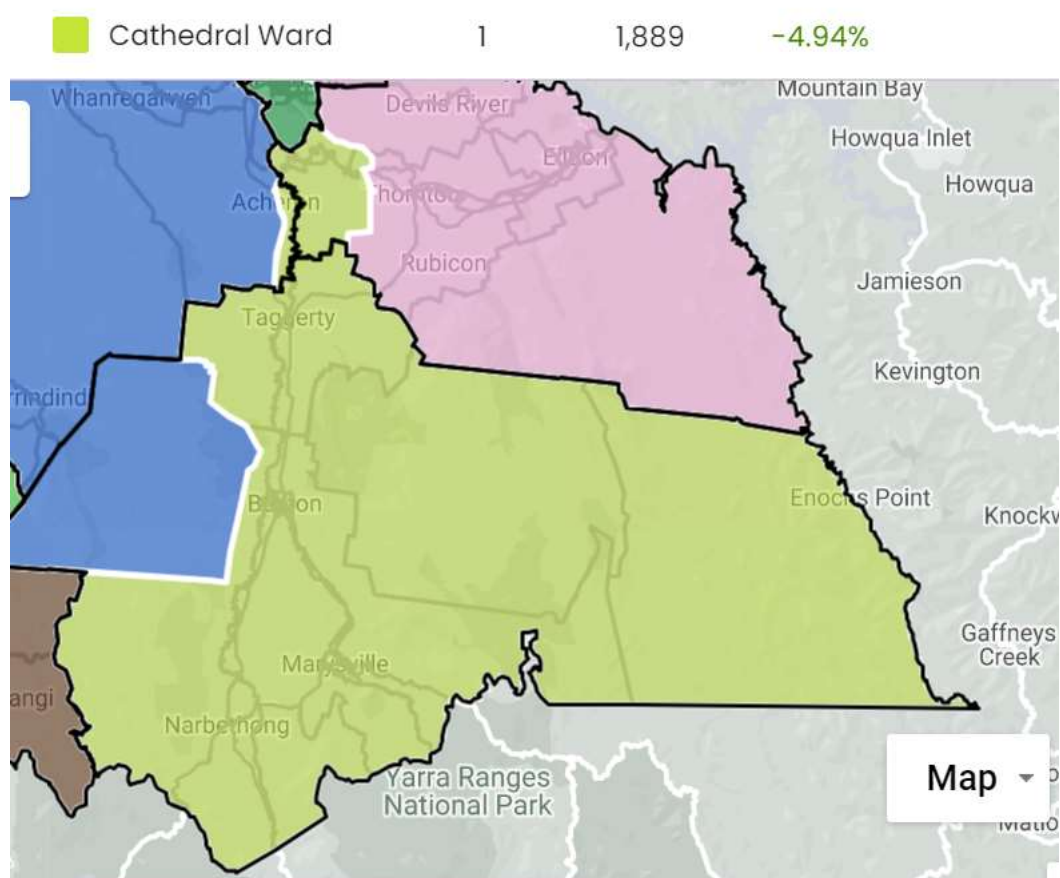


Figure 3. Option for Cathedral Ward including Acheron and excluding Murrindindi and Toolangi

### 2. Adopt the 2019 VEC Final Report for Murrindindi Shire Council model

Preferably, the VEC should consider combining wards and sharing councillors, similar to the 2019 VEC Final Report for Murrindindi Shire Council. However, that report also includes the town area of Murrindindi west of the Black Range in the Cathedral Ward, with the same above-mentioned problems, so the boundaries would need to be redrawn. Nonetheless, by combining wards, the 'one vote, one value' ideal seems easier to uphold, fewer localities are split, and the electoral boundaries work better within the geospatial constraints thus also reflecting how communities interact and align and would want to be represented. See Figure 4.

## Murrindindi Shire Council

Map of Recommended Option  
Seven Councillors, Three Wards



Figure 4. The 2019 VEC Final Report for Murrindindi Shire Council model but excluding Murrindindi from the Cathedral Ward

3. Ask the Minister to waive the voter equity requirement for wards that cannot be reconciled to new electoral borders

As noted in the instructions for this submission:

Murrindindi Shire Council is geographically large and contains many diverse landscapes and communities. Many of these communities are physically separated by rivers, mountainous areas, and rugged terrain. Given the relatively low numbers of voters and a low rate of growth focused on a limited number of towns, even small adjustments to existing ward boundaries in one location can have flow-on effects to voter deviations and ward boundaries across the whole shire. Adjusting the existing single-councillor ward model to create wards that comply with the legislated +/-10% requirement whilst still maintaining communities of interest for Murrindindi Shire Council is therefore challenging.

If a solution cannot be found that upholds voter representation and existing community alignments, then the legislation needs to change to reflect the difficulties of realigning electoral boundaries in a rural shire. Legislation should serve the people. As is, trying to uphold one form of justice, voter equity, seems to create a series of greater injustices: causing under-representation for voters who

have been electorally isolated from their community, creating meaningless ward boundaries that do not reflect how people live and want to be represented, and compromising democratic integrity by presenting candidates with electorates they feel unable to represent and serve. The tail is wagging the dog.

I agree that 'one vote, one value' is an important ideal to aspire towards so each person's vote counts equally. However, enacting that legislation poses a problem for us in Murrindindi Shire Council area because of the topography. The magnificent mountain ranges, rivers, reservoirs and reserves not only foster communities that strongly identify with those features, but those natural boundaries effectively restrict the direction a ward can grow to comply with voter equality regulations.

No ward should be squeezed beyond its natural identity zone or have its member communities removed to satisfy voting equity. Changing some ward boundaries may be beneficial or at least not problematic, but in other cases, dropping a village from the ward in which it identifies or forcing disparate communities to share a ward would create a bewildering loss of both identity and the expectation of reasonable representation. Nibbling away at the periphery of growing towns to include voters into less populated wards necessarily places those voters at the extremity of their new ward rather than being in the heart of the place in which they identify. Changing electoral boundaries should only occur if it benefits or has minimal impact on voters and their ability to be represented fairly.

Rural electoral boundaries are different to those in the city. Having lived in suburbia, I know that moving an electoral boundary there was not very impactful. Perhaps to my shame, I never met any of my local councillors when I lived in Melbourne. It is different in a rural shire. I often converse with my local councillor and the mayor, discussing problems, opportunities and potential solutions. Having a sense of place, community and belonging is more important in a rural shire, and we want that sense of place to be shared by and advocated by our elected representative.

We want all councillors to be motivated to represent their wards. This means that each ward should have a meaningful identity and be able to be reasonably serviced by their elected representative. The time it takes to drive to each locality in a ward should be a factor in determining an electoral boundary.

It would be valuable if the 10% deviation allowance to the 'one vote, one value' rule could be waived by the minister, especially for rural electorates, if applying it would disrupt the identity of a connected community, expand a ward boundary beyond natural barriers, isolate the representation of a community from neighbouring areas, or make it difficult for a councillor to service all of their constituents.