

**Sandra Gatehouse**

**Submission to the Electoral Advisory Panel**

**Local Council electoral structure review – Greater Geelong City Council**

I am a long-standing resident of Barwon Heads; a Councillor elected for three terms (9 years - a relic) when the City of Prahran was a separate entity and a former employee of an inner city council. Since living in the City of Greater Geelong I have been an active participant in local issues, engaging with single ward councillors, government appointed Administrators and the ward Councillors that have been elected at the last 2 council elections. I am a long-standing member and former President of the Barwon Heads Association (BHA), and I am an initiator of the Combined Bellarine Community Association (CBCA). I currently Chair the Barwon Coast Committee of Management. I was a significant contributor to the Bellarine Distinctive Areas and Landscape project (the Bellarine DAL.)

This is a private submission and reflects my views and experience. It will repeat some of the concerns raised by the BHA and the CBCA.

**SUMMARY OF MY CONCERNS**

I am very concerned that there has been insufficient time to prepare for this review:

- Insufficient time to engage with the community to ensure they properly understand the impacts.
- It was advertised at the beginning of school holidays in the middle of winter when many locals are away. The 3 weeks we have had to consider and discuss the proposed models and the availability of detailed voter data has not enabled individuals and local groups to prepare well-researched submissions that can deal with the significant deficiencies in each of the three models proposed by the Review Panel.
- There is insufficient time to put forward alternative names. Names should be consistent across Geelong and not pick up random connections.
- The boundaries in the voter numbers by locality (map) on page 4 of the Fact Sheet for this review are not always used for the ward boundaries in the different models presented in the Preliminary paper making it very hard to develop this model further in the available time.

The significant weaknesses in the three models presented in the Review Panel's Preliminary report provide a strong justification for retaining the status quo for the current Bellarine ward. Any model with single Councillor wards is found wanting when compared to the current arrangement. It appears impossible to meet the +/- 10% voter tolerance requirement and not divide Bellarine Peninsula communities. The proposed outcomes are intolerable when the objective is to achieve an academic result.

**The Single Ward Model – a mistake for Geelong**

The City of Greater Geelong is at the crossroads. We are witnessing significant growth. Much of its farmland has been re-zoned for housing estates. The Ramsar wetlands are being threatened by groundwater contamination. The public transport is hopeless, and the roads are inadequate. Geelong needs a strong and stable Council with Councillors that are capable of working together and supporting their communities facing these multiple stresses. When the City of Greater Geelong was sacked in 2016 an inquiry commissioned by Local Government Minister Natalie Hutchins found the council had become so dysfunctional it could not govern properly and should be dismissed. That Council reflected single councillor wards and comprised a random group of people with mixed values and objectives. They failed to represent the ratepayers in a

collaborative way, took sides and played ratepayers off against each other. It was a disgrace to witness and the appropriate action was taken.

A Citizen's Jury recommended the future design of the City of Greater Geelong, including the representative structure encompassing the composition of wards. The Jury's recommendations underpinned the multi-councillor ward structure adopted. The 2016 Inquiry resolved as follows:

*'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.'*  
(Executive Summary page 12)

Since then we witnessed a welcome return to stability with the Administrators, and have supported the real effort by the current Council to deal with some very difficult issues. Our 3 ward councillors are all very different, but have worked together and we feel we have had good access and they have listened.

The City of Greater Geelong is a big business that is facing significant challenges. It is my concern that any proposed changes to ward structure and the single ward model will add stress and instability at a time it needs strong leadership, stability and good representation.

### **The proposed ward structures**

The 3 options presented for the Bellarine will cause unnecessary instability and conflict for the communities of the Bellarine. They reflect an academic exercise to put numbers in boxes but go back to the old model of having different representatives for each side of the road. They will destroy the collaboration that has been established within communities and across the Bellarine. In my view the way our Bellarine towns have been split to achieve an academic outcome is not acceptable. The trauma of looking at the detail on the maps was extraordinary. I don't accept any of the models put forward.

However, in the context of the limited powers of the review I submit the following:

- I support the retention of 11 Councillors for the Greater Geelong City Council.
- Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove must be included in the same ward no matter what model is adopted for the future electoral boundaries for Greater Geelong City Council
- Model 1 is the best of the three models. However, it has a number of weaknesses when compared to the current electoral structure where we have three Councillors representing the whole of the Bellarine Peninsula.
- Moolap is not part of the Bellarine community and this area should be included in the ward that is the eastern ward of Geelong.
- The names suggested in the preliminary report are not suitable and several are not in common use for localities on the Bellarine and are not representative of the ward areas.
- Names require much more research, justification and consideration than is possible in 3 weeks. We recommend that for wards covering parts of the current Bellarine ward naming conventions be adopted referring to part of the Bellarine – eg Central Bellarine, South Bellarine etc

### **OUR LINKS – OUR BELLARINE COMMUNITY**

#### **The Bellarine**

Barwon Heads is part of the Bellarine Peninsula and has close ties with Ocean Grove. I strongly believe that it is vitally important that connected and integrated communities be represented in the Greater Geelong City Council by the same elected representative/s. Barwon Heads is

strongly connected and integrated with Ocean Grove and the wider Bellarine Peninsula and has many interests shared with Ocean Grove . Our connections are:

### **Area and Physical features**

The Bellarine peninsula is an area well known to and understood by government and its agencies. It has been declared as a Distinctive Area and Landscape under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 and is recognised as a distinct place in the Greater Geelong Planning Scheme with a specific Localised Planning Strategy. Barwon Heads together with Ocean Grove and other Bellarine towns has always been included in this strategy with specific integrated planning policies and objectives.

### **The Barwon River**

The Barwon River is a key physical feature in the Bellarine and together with the ocean, river and beaches connects and binds Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove each sharing the recreational and social values of the extensive swimming, surfing, boating, and fishing interests across both communities.

The Barwon Coast Committee of Management provides an important connection between Barwon Heads, Breamlea and Ocean Grove. It is appointed by the State to manage coastal crown land in Ocean Grove, Breamlea and Barwon Heads. It is the Manager of the Port of Barwon Heads.

The ocean and river beaches are the core of our communities and enable the social connections formed from involvement with surf lifesaving clubs, surfing, swimming, fishing, and boating.

### **Community**

The Barwon Heads community has developed and maintains many relationships with the Ocean Grove community and more widely across the Bellarine. We share social networks, facilities and the custodianship of our precious coast and river systems with the Ocean Grove community. Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove being joined by the Barwon River and the ocean share recreational values and interests both on and off the water. The City of Greater Geelong's Social Infrastructure plan states that the "proximity of Barwon Heads to Ocean Grove means that the two communities share access to some facilities" - City of Greater Geelong Social Infrastructure Plan, June 2020 p36

Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove communities have strong social connections which include:

- Service clubs including Lions Club of Ocean Grove/Barwon Heads, Rotary Club of Ocean Grove (whose service area includes Barwon Heads) and the Ocean Grove/Barwon Heads RSL all have membership from both communities.
- Senior Citizens Clubs, the combined churches and Scouts also have strong links with similar organisations in Ocean Grove and in organisations in other Bellarine communities – e.g., the Scouts combine with Queenscliff Scouts for their weekly meetings and are part of the Geelong Peninsula District which is mostly Bellarine Peninsula scout groups.
- Sporting groups and facilities including Surf Life Saving clubs at Ocean Grove and 13th Beach, surfboard riders club, cycling clubs, bowls clubs, gymnasiums, swimming pool and pony clubs are all linked to similar clubs in Ocean Grove and on the Bellarine Peninsula.
- Arts groups including Barwon Heads Arts Council and Barwon Heads Quilters have numerous members from Ocean Grove and the Bellarine community and the Barwon Heads Arts Hub project includes Ocean Grove community representation.
- Schools and childcare facilities.

- Some medical, dental, imaging and pathology services for Barwon Heads residents are in or provided from Ocean Grove.
- Commercial facilities such as supermarkets, hardware, and light industrial services (including garden supplies and motor vehicle servicing) used by Barwon Heads residents are in Ocean Grove.
- Major emergency services including CFA, ambulance, police, SES, and coastguard are in Ocean Grove and service both communities.

These strong social networks and supports that exist between Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove and between Barwon Heads and the rest of the Bellarine Peninsula must be maintained and strengthened in the interest of the health and wellbeing of the Barwon Heads /Ocean Grove community. Council representation of these strongly connected communities must not be compromised by shifting Barwon Heads into a different Council ward where the community may not share such interests or may wish to pursue different interests or priorities than those of the Barwon Heads community.

### **Traffic**

The main road from the southern Bellarine is the C129/C121 road which runs through Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads to connect with Geelong and the southern entry to the Geelong by-pass. This is one of three major roads that connect the Bellarine Peninsula with the rest of Victoria. Significant increases in visitor demands during peak holiday periods result in significant use of this road across the Barwon Heads Bridge and along the spit to Ocean Grove.

There is limited public transport within the Bellarine District and that which is provided flows in an east-west direction. The Route 55 Bus route passes through Barwon Heads and terminates in Ocean Grove. This bus route is an important link between Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove. The problems created by traffic in Barwon Heads are common throughout the Bellarine but the constraint of the river crossing and the traffic flow between Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove in the summer holiday period highlights the significance of this road link to both communities. The Barwon Heads and the Ocean Grove community have both formed committees with representation from each town to work with Council and Government to address these issues. Joint Council representation of both towns jointly is critical to resolve these issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Models**

None of the models work for the Bellarine and its communities. There is no value attributed to communities of interest, geographical connection and coastal location.

Model 1 as the best of poor choices, meeting the needs of our community as it maintains the Barwon Heads area (including Breamlea and Connewarre) in the same ward as Ocean Grove.

Model 2 provides a more equitable voter distribution, but it splits Barwon Heads from Breamlea and Connewarre and places these two areas in a ward with Indented Heads, St Leonards and Point Lonsdale. This ward (Connewarre) is divided by the Connewarre wetlands and the only road link between Breamlea and Connewarre and the rest of the ward is the road through Barwon Heads or travelling via Geelong and the Bellarine Highway. The Breamlea and Connewarre communities will have no social or community links with the remainder of the ward under this scenario.

Model 3. Is a disaster for our local community and our Bellarine. It brings back traumatic memories of another time when Barwon Heads was in a western ward represented by a single councillor. This model places Ocean Grove and Barwon Heads in different wards and splits Ocean Grove into two different wards. Under this model the parts of the community of Barwon

Heads/Ocean Grove will be represented by three Councillors. The Barwon Heads, Connewarre and Breamlea areas are in a ward with the Armstrong Creek area where there will be few links and the needs and demographics of these areas are completely different to those of the population of Armstrong Creek. It will be an unmitigated disaster for our community as we are in a ward with the growth areas of southern Geelong. We have no common interests with these communities.

**Ward names.**

The names proposed in the three models are NOT satisfactory. For this review there is insufficient time for an in-depth consideration of ward names. Without the detailed work I support the continued use of the Bellarine as a ward name and the use of directions to differentiate between the wards.

**Representation before the panel**

I am currently on holiday on Western Australia with my family. I would hope to be able to talk to this submission but it will depend on the timing.

Sandra Gatehouse

[REDACTED]

Barwon Heads, 3227

Australia

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26<sup>th</sup> July 2023