

19 July 2023

The Hon Melissa Horne
Minister for Local Government
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Dear Minister

WILD (Women in Local Democracy) is writing to you because of its significant concerns about the local council electoral structure review being carried out into the Greater Geelong City Council. Our concern arises from our examination of the Preliminary Report by the Electoral Representation Advisory Panel.

In its report designed to elicit comment and responses, the Panel has proposed 3 possible models, two proposing ward structures to be represented by 11 councillors and one, 12 councillors. We understand the legislative basis on which the Panel has designed its alternatives.

By the Panel's own admission, each alternative has deficiencies. The major one, we believe, is that in order to meet all the legislated requirements, coherent suburbs or recognised localities must be severed and allocated to different wards, sometimes across significant barriers such as, for example, the Melbourne Road. These problems were not evident in the previous system of multi-member wards because larger wards allowed more freedom in the drawing of boundaries.

Subdivision into 11 or 12 wards, however, while observing the technical demands of a democratic system, as the legislation intends, has undemocratic consequences by creating serious problems of representation.

On the one hand, voters in "arbitrarily" divided suburbs and localities will be confused and perhaps disillusioned, a serious problem for local government. On the other, prospective councillors, those campaigning to be elected, will have difficulties directing their campaign efforts effectively. This is a cause of grave concern for WILD which advocates and works to achieve gender equity, diversity and active citizenship.

Since its establishment, the City of Greater Geelong, at best, has struggled to provide good and effective governance. Now, whichever single-member ward structure model is chosen, even if marginally altered, it will contribute to further problems for local governance. The Panel's hands are tied by its brief.

The underlying issue for you to consider, Minister, is what can be done to save local democracy in Geelong. The answer, indirectly, lies in the Panel's report on page 16. Although the Panel comments that it considers 11 or 12 councillors appropriate to represent the people of Greater Geelong, the table providing the ratio of voters per councillor clearly shows that a Greater Geelong councillor must represent almost twice as many voters as the next highest councillor to voter ratio.

In other words, re-arranging the ward boundaries and changing from multi-member to single-member wards, however well or inadequately it can be done, is not the issue.

Local government's democratic deficit in Greater Geelong is that a limit of twelve councillors leads to under-representation. Greater Geelong's population is too large to be adequately represented by 11 or 12 councillors. Either Greater Geelong should be divided into 24 wards, allowing for further population growth, or the City should be subdivided into at least 2 municipalities.

Minister, WILD considers that the situation of local government, governance and genuine democratic representation demands that you must take steps to address this issue. We ask that you raise this serious matter with the Premier and the Cabinet as well as all government Ministers. Victorian local government and the City of Greater Geelong need and deserve real democracy and proper representation.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Wills OAM
Convenor
Women in Local Democracy (WILD)

cc.

Christine Couzens MP, Member for Geelong: [REDACTED]

Alison Marchant MP, Member for Bellarine: [REDACTED]

Ella George MP, Member for Lara: [REDACTED]

Darren Cheeseman MP, Member for South Barwon: [REDACTED]

The Hon Gayle Tierney MP, Member for Western Victoria: [REDACTED]

Julie Eisenbise, Chair Electoral Representation Advisory Panel: [REDACTED]