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To: Northern Grampians ERAP Submissions 2023
Subject: Peter Rose Submission to VEC in relation to Northern Grampians Shire

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Submission to the Victorian Electoral Commission Review of the Northern Grampians Shire February, 2023

As a resident of the St. Arnaud District for 40 years, and of the Kara Kara Ward of Northern Grampians Shire, I am very concerned about the prospect of the Victorian Electoral Commission choosing to create a shire without subdivisions in which all candidates, wherever they are located, are all placed within one single ward, so that the whole shire votes for them.

This submission is focused almost entirely on refuting that prospect and I wish - very clearly - to set out those reasons for you. We are also very unhappy with the VEC's decision, in 2007, to reduce the number of Councillors from nine to seven and to create a non-viable central ward which has worked against our interests.

I appreciate that the VEC would like to bring our various communities together in a way that would enable us to unite and work equitably with one another. I also appreciate that you would like to create a single coherent municipality under an equitable form of proportional representation.

But I strongly believe that such an arrangement would disrupt the existing but uneasy consensus that has been pieced together by councillors and staff with great difficulty for over 26 years.

I am the coordinator of the Cara Quarry Action group, which was formed in 2019 to present local residents' views about the large amount of gravel extraction in our district. We have been concerned about a number of recent situations where the Council has made choices that have adversely affected us. We live close to the northeast boundary of the shire, about as far away as it is possible to get from the Stawell Centre. This means that decisions that are made there, over an hour's drive away, which directly impact upon us, can be made entirely without our interests or concerns in mind.

A most egregious example was a proposal put forward by the Planning Department in September 2019, which would have opened a major gravel pit on a property located directly adjacent to the Five Ways intersection at Carapooee. This is right in the middle of an area with over 20 rural residential properties, all of which would have been inundated with dust which would have clogged up our roofs and made it impossible to collect rainwater. It would also have embroiled us in very loud operational noise which would have disturbed the peace and quiet of the whole area and severely impacted elderly residents who were dying of cancer or suffering from other serious illnesses.

Yet the Planning Department, all of whom live in Stawell, had convinced themselves that we would fully cooperate with them, even though they had kept this proposal secret from us for almost five years. When, during a compulsory residents meeting, we asked each of them individually if they would be prepared to agree to this proposal if the same gravel pit happened to be in exactly the same proximity to where each of them lived, not one of them found their own proposal acceptable. It would have severely disrupted their own lives and devalued their own properties.

Yet they were prepared to let it happen to us, had we not protested loudly and vigorously to have the proposal withdrawn.

Many years earlier, the Council had purchased the Mine Lane pit just a few kilometres away and extracted over two million tonnes of gravel from it. This had rendered the lives of those same residents intolerable, yet the Council was utterly indifferent to the misery it caused and our repeated protests were repeatedly ignored.

We have also had to endure intolerable noise levels from the Babylon and Wild Horses Music Festivals since 2017.

Two more recent decisions have also adversely affected residents who live in the town of St. Arnaud.

For decades, very deep gutters were a feature of the main shopping centre because local residents knew, from experience, that properties would be inundated whenever there was a flood. But the Council – seemingly without drawing on local knowledge and without consulting the local residents – filled these gutters in.

So recently, the town was flooded for the first time in over a century.

Council has also approved the construction of low-quality social housing on Bowen Street directly against the petitions of residents who actually live there.

We suggest that this is because the majority of Councillors who live in or around Stawell, as well as their employees, do not actually live here, do not have to put up personally with these intrusions, and are too far away to appreciate our needs.

If, in a single ward shire, we did not have councillors directly responsible for representing us locally, our concerns would be given even less consideration than what they are now.

Whenever surveys have been done to assess how satisfied residents are with Council services in this part of the Shire, the results have invariably been poor to very poor.

Reporters from North Central News have also noted how meetings held in St. Arnaud can be disruptive and rowdy, because ratepayers here are often unhappy with Council decisions, whereas meetings held in Stawell are generally harmonious.

Amalgamation was imposed on us against our wishes – and without consultation - by the Kennett Government in 1996.

It has not worked for us, and we suspect that it also has not worked for other small towns like ours in similar situations.

Why?

1. St.Arnaud and Stawell share absolutely no community of interest so a single ward throughout the shire is utterly unrealistic

When amalgamations were first proposed back in the 1980s, it was clearly stated that this should only take place where the communities involved shared a wide variety of common interests and interactions.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough that we are two utterly separate communities that hardly ever interact with one another. A quarter of a century of amalgamation has done little or nothing to bring us closer together, and a shire which operated as a single ward would impose an artificial and superficial unity on us against our will and to our disadvantage.

There is little difference between this idea and the state government's decision in 1996 to impose an unnatural amalgamation on us.

A Shire-wide perspective is quite meaningless in a municipality whose two main communities contain economies, geography, demographics and aspirations which are completely different,

In order to illustrate this, we can go back to 1999/2000, when the Council appointed two Shire-wide committees - Tourism and Economic Development - to try and put together some common policies. They contained members from the two major centres as well as other parts of the Shire like Hall's Gap and Marnoo.

Both were disbanded at the request of their members.

Although there was no personal conflict between committee members, and every effort was made to co-operate and co-ordinate their activities, they found that the needs of their local communities could not be enhanced by developing Shire-wide policies. It was much more useful to develop priorities and points of reference within their own communities and, where relevant, beyond them to other places outside the Shire on their respective highway corridors.

This is why, at the time, the Hall's Gap Tourism and Business Association, the Stawell Chamber of Commerce and the St Arnaud Development and Tourism Association then, for some time, continued to promote their own interests in their own towns. Where wider interaction does occur, it is more likely to be shared with much closer communities of interest outside the Shire boundaries; Stawell with Ararat and Horsham, St Arnaud with Donald and Charlton.

Significantly, we are not aware of any further attempts to establish Shire-wide committees and we would maintain that not ONE person, not even those on the council staff, can claim to have a Shire-wide perspective. One of our difficulties with staff is that almost all of them are located in Stawell, and because this is where they live and where their children go to school, even if their duties sometimes take them to St. Arnaud, their personal perspective is limited to Stawell and its needs.

This is not their fault: but simply reflects the problems of trying to put together two communities that just do not belong together.

Very little traffic moves between the two towns on the secondary road that links Stawell to St. Arnaud. For a time, Council tried to set up a bus service between the two towns but it was just not patronised.

Our two economies are so divergent that it is impossible to find enough points of common interest that enable us to link them together for any coherent purpose.

If you put us all together into a single ward, it will not work.

The priorities and needs of an industrial town like Stawell and an agricultural-based town like St. Arnaud are significantly different in character and are often in conflict. Stawell's economy operates entirely separately from St. Arnaud. There are virtually no shared services. The interaction is limited to the obvious comings and goings of some council employees, and less than a handful of St. Arnaud residents may – at any one time - be employed in Stawell.

Councillors in this Shire must deal with the competing interests of quite different economies.

2. The increased demands placed on councillors due to the divergence of interest in delivering services between the two centres.

One significant problem of the Shire operating in two regions and covering two distinct communities is that when a decision is made and a project implemented in one community, no advantage or spin-off flows through to the other.

The opening of the Stawell Mall, for example, conferred no benefit whatsoever on St. Arnaud. The new work in the St. Arnaud main street - with its disastrous results - is of absolutely no interest to Stawell residents.

This means that when government grants are on offer or new projects are being proposed, there is competition between the two communities for resources, so debate on Council is intense, decisions are that much more difficult to make and the demands on councillors are that much greater than in a council with a centralised community of interests. Our councillors must work hard to avoid the perception that there are winners and losers to promote harmony between our two communities.

In the case of St. Arnaud, we have argued - utterly without success - for more staff to be employed here to promote our interests, so much of the work that would normally fall to such staff has to be carried out by our two councillors.

2. Interacting with two sets of authorities

Generally, councils who share a centralised community of interest operate within the same boundaries as other authorities within their jurisdiction, but because NGS crosses the great divide and operates within two sub-regions, councillors are required to deal with twice the number of authorities as many other Shires in getting decisions made and tasks completed.

It also means that Councillors have to sit through meetings where issues that are of no interest to the places where they live have to be discussed. This is because:-

- The towns are located on different Highway routes - Western and Sunraysia
- Residents are not attracted to shop in each other's precincts [St Arnaud people generally go to Maryborough or Bendigo, while Stawell people to Ararat or Horsham]
- There is little or no interaction between businesses in either town. If a factory or business opens or closes in one town, it has zero impact in the other.
- They have separate local newspapers -The North Central News [which includes Charlton in the Buloke Shire] and the Stawell Times -and the events that occur in one town generally attract little or no interest in the other.
- Stawell residents have little or no reason to travel to St Arnaud. Many have not even been there.
- St Arnaud residents are likely only to pass through Stawell because they are on their way to the Grampians for recreational purposes.
- The towns operate in different Football and Netball associations [North Central and Wimmera]]
- They are divided by the Federal Electorates of Mallee and Wannon and the State Electorates of Ripon and Lowan
- They have different Health Services [East Wimmera and Stawell] Although we concede that, with its improved services, St. Arnaud residents are often referred to the Stawell Hospital
- They are divided by the Telstra 053 and 054 telephone zones.
- Have separate magistrates courts - Stawell and St. Arnaud
- Exist within different Catchment Management Authority areas Wimmera [Horsham] and North Central [Bendigo]
- Have separate local learning networks [LLEN] - North Central and Central Grampians

That often requires our councillors to double up in terms of attending meetings of the various authorities and committees that they are required, in the normal course of their roles and portfolios, to attend.

3. The Workload on Councillors and its impact on our community

The workload placed on councillors across the whole state is very heavy and very time-consuming. The amount of paperwork that comes across their desks is prodigious and difficult to sort out, so much so that they are not always aware of what is happening in their own wards. When, for example, the proposal was put forward by the planning department to establish a gravel pit in our area - which we referred to in paragraphs three and four of page one – our Kara Kara councillors were not even aware of it.

Their remuneration – given the enormous time commitments involved - is so limited, and the term in office is set at four years, which is an extended amount of time. This tends to mean that only people with well-established business operations, retirees, or those with a spouse who provides a good income, have the time or the personal resources to make that kind of commitment. The workload on our two councillors is currently very heavy, particularly when all of the leadership roles that a rural community expects them to play are taken into account. Their task in representing this ward, which is a minority population with differing aspirations to the majority in Stawell and Hall's Gap, has much the same challenges that those representing minorities encountered everywhere.

Theirs is a hard job.

With the remuneration they receive covering only their personal expenses, their role is essentially voluntary, but they frequently work between 30 and 40 hours a week, which is more or less the equivalent of a full-time job.

For these reasons, people here are discouraged from standing for Council, much to the detriment of local democracy. The Kara Kara Ward, over the last decade, has held only one election, as the number of nominations has generally been the same as the number of seats available. At the last by-election in November of 2022, none of the candidates actually lived in our ward.

We attribute much of this to the fact that the St. Arnaud community has lost its municipal independence and we no longer have a council at the centre of our community. The shire offices are currently staffed by only two people and all decisions are referred to Stawell, which is an hour's drive away.

This has had a detrimental effect on the town, as local government - for us – is no longer local. According to regular surveys, residents in this ward are largely dissatisfied with council services.

Apart from the dedication of those who serve on SCAN - the St. Arnaud Community Action Network - there is widespread apathy and a sense of powerlessness in the town. This means that the issue of de-amalgamation hangs in the air, and recently, has raised its head yet again.

When, in 2007, our representation was reduced to two, our community - with far less opportunity for either formal or informal contact with most Councillors as well as Council staff who are based an hour away in Stawell – has become ever more marginalised.

4. Travelling Time for Councillors

Because Northern Grampians has TWO main centres one hour apart, council meetings have always alternated between them. Councillors who do not live in these towns, and many of them don't, may have even further distances to travel. A councillor, for example, who lives in Hall's Gap will face three hours of travel back and forth when meetings are being held in St. Arnaud.

There are six other shires around the state, all with geographic areas larger than ours, but each of them revolves around just ONE central point, and the distances involved usually require less than an hour of travel. Buloke is certainly a comparable size, but with an administrative centre in Wycheproof, councillors from various wards need to travel no more than half an hour. Central Goldfields, Southern Grampians, West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Towong and Yarriambiack, all have centres that are accessible within half an hour.

5. It is pointless to enable all voters in this shire to have a say on all candidates

Local Government is meant to be local, and in smaller rural communities, this means that voters already know their own candidates very well and are able to assess their commitment and capabilities. Because no natural contact occurs between the two towns, new campaigners from one town would be completely unknown in the other, and candidates who wanted Shire-wide votes would need to work very hard and have the financial resources to plan and operate separate campaigns because issues that are vital at one end of the Shire will almost certainly be completely irrelevant in the other.

Candidates from this side of the Shire, with its smaller population, would also have less chance of being elected solely for that reason.

For example, Tourism is vital in Hall's Gap, manufacturing and mining in Stawell, and agriculture and its products in St. Arnaud. A candidate trying to get votes in all of them would have to formulate very different campaigns on quite unrelated issues.

Certainly, voters would be able to have a say on a wider variety of candidates, but to what effect? They are not likely to receive any advantage by voting for someone from the other side of the Shire where there are situations and issues that have little or no relevance to them.

Our interests are really best served by local candidates who understand their local community and its needs and will go into Council to fight for them.

5. Dissatisfaction with the Central Ward

After the review of 2007, a mixture of multiple councillors and single councillor wards was bestowed upon us, and the number of councillors was reduced from nine to seven. This was against the wishes of both ends of the Shire because the community surrounding Stawell was twice the size of the community around St. Arnaud, and the six-three ratio reflected their respective populations. This balance was upset when the number was reduced to seven.

We were also very strongly opposed to the creation of a central ward because it made, and continues to make, no sense. This ward represents neither a geographic nor demographic community of interest. It covers a vast area – almost half the Shire - that extends from Banyena down to the edge of Stawell and along the Western Highway. Residents at both ends have quite different orientations, and we believe that the councillor currently elected to this ward is biased towards the Stawell side of the shire where he happens to live, and – emphatically - he does not represent our interests.

Although some Government services, such as tourism, and the departments of Education, Human Services, the DELWP and the Country Fire Authority have since noted our amalgamation and included the whole shire within their regions, the boundaries that we listed on page three, in particular those between state and federal parliamentary seats, recognise how the shire will always operate as two entirely separate communities. The previous division between the Bolangum and Grampians wards reflects the communities of interest with which the people in those areas most identify. Those living at the north end of that ward tend to regard themselves as part of the St. Arnaud community, and those to the south see themselves as a part of the Stawell community.

Having seven councillors ensures that St. Arnaud may elect no more than two councillors, a number that is inequitable when our population, both in the town and the surrounding district that used to make up the Bolangum Ward, which extended as far south as Navarre and as far west as Marnoo entitled us to a third of the councillors in the Shire.

The only way to restore this balance is to eliminate this ward and reduce the number to six, with four of them centred around Stawell and two around St. Arnaud, and the boundaries would be similar to the original Bolangum and Stawell Wards.

The population of the Shire has declined from 13,155 in 2003 to 11,885 at the 2021 census, which may facilitate that change.

But we really need the nine councillors that we used to have before, irrespective of what the VEC dictates about population ratios in relation to the number of councillors, because their workload, whatever the population, is prodigious.

We believe the situation that we have described is somewhat unique in this state and requires special arrangements to make it work. The real solution, which is beyond the scope of the VEC, is to de-amalgamate the two communities which should never have been brought together in the first place..

Peter Rose

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