

Ward boundary review - Murrindindi Shire Council - Response Submission
Nick Legge - Taggerty - 13 March 2024, 09:08 am

A key objective of the Local Government Act, namely section 4(b), requires that

Councils are constituted as representative bodies that are accountable, transparent, collaborative, efficient and engaged with their communities.

The situation proposed in Option 1, with people on the west side of the Black Range expecting to be accountably, collaboratively or efficiently represented by a member 95% of whose electors live on the other side of the Black Range is unacceptable. How can such an electorate construction be construed by the Panel as consistent with S4(b) of the Act.

And the data on which the review is based seems very odd. Take Eildon Ward - the largest in terms of electors under both options. The 2021 census data indicates that residents older than 19 years in the Eildon (ABS locality) numbered 810, Rubicon 37 (approx), Thornton 265, Maintongoon 64 (approx), Taylor Bay 65 (approx) and Devils River 12 (approx) a total of 1253. There are perhaps another 200 persons aged over 19 on the outskirts of Alexandra outside the town boundaries set by ABS. Yet Option 1 has the ward voter population as 2183 and Option 2 has it at 2218, implying around 800 non-resident ratepayers.

On the flip side Alexandra - - as in the township area determined by ABS - - had 2000 residents aged over 19 in the 2021 census, but Redgate ward which covers some of the outskirts is projected to have just 1828 voters come October.

How is this so? Are Eildon houseboat owners all on the electoral roll? Or is it that the various caravan park owners along the Goulburn River have either persuaded their site-holders to enrol, or perhaps done so on their behalf, in order to increase their clout at Council. At the very least the report should have addressed the issue of why the voter data is so at odds with census data? .

Indeed, why is none of the data on which the .id modelling is based not included in the report? The modelling on which the proposals rest should be open data for anybody to access and to develop their own options.

It seems likely that many, perhaps most, owners of 'weekenders', of whom Cathedral Ward has many, are probably unaware of their entitlement to register. If the VEC advertised the importance of non-residents exercising their voting rights it could result in a significant increase in the number of voters. Presumably the modelling that has been done about the likely number of voters in October is based on ordinary non-residents remaining largely unaware of their voting entitlements. Contrast this with the advertising blitz about enrolling to vote that accompanies State and Federal elections.

The report fails to name the people responsible for the boundary review simple stating on p.6 that it comprises the 'executive chairperson' (whoever that may be) and the 'program sponsor' (whoever that may be). This lack of openness in what is a key part of the democratic process is noted, but given the attitude that the State Government mostly displays to Local Government it is perhaps not surprising. It also seems odd that whereas the only role of the VEC in the boundary review (ref s. 16(5) of the LG Act) is to provide administrative support to the Panel, the report is published using the VEC logo and imprimatur, and on p. 5 or the report it is stated that

After considering research and the requirements of the Act, the VEC is presenting 2 models for public consultation.

So is it the Panel or the VEC running the show?

And was there a pre-emptive decision to leave Koriella in Koriella Ward because of the boundary review rule that ward names may not change? If so, this would be inconsistent with s.4(b) of the Act.

I am confident that more reasonable options are available, but in the absence of public data only VEC can develop these. Regardless, if attention is to be paid to s4(b) of the Act no areas on the west side of the Black Range should be part of Cathedral Ward.