

Electoral structure review - Greater Bendigo City Council - Response Submission Advance Heathcote Incorporated - Heathcote - 19 July 2023, 03:54 pm

Advance Heathcote Incorporated, a community-based organisation actively involved in local community planning and advocacy for the Heathcote community & District does not support proposed Model 3. Models 1 & 2 maintain Heathcote and District community identity and connectedness that are important to our community in a local government environment.

Model 3 poses difficulties for the Heathcote & District community that has a long history of community identity evolving from the 1850's Goldrush and more recently the local government boundaries of the past McIvor Shire Council collapsing into the City of Greater Bendigo as a consequence of Victorian Government Council amalgamations in 1994.

Heathcote 3523 postcode includes Arglye, Costerfield, Derrinal, Heathcote, Heathcote South, Knowsley, Lady's Pass, Moormbool West, Mount Camel and Redcastle representing a population on 3,965 (Census Data 2021).

Proposed Model 3 splits the Heathcote & District community between two Wards:
Axedale Ward:

- Costerfield
- Moormbool West
- Knowsley
- Lady's Pass
- Mount Camel
- Redcastle

Eppalock Ward:

- Heathcote
- Heathcote South
- Argyle
- Derrinal

From a small-town rural community perspective, this split does not make sense and complicates community representation and communication. Over the past decade, the Heathcote community has worked hard to develop strong lines of communication with our local Councillors and Council staff to implement Heathcote Community Plans resulting in improved liveability and community capacity. Splitting the community would mean that community planning would cross over two Wards and become unnecessarily complicated. Also, residents (who historically identify with Heathcote) living in the proposed Axedale Ward would have few resources as the Heathcote township has the community infra-structure to represent the majority of the residents.

Another concern regarding Model 3: the establishment of the Axedale Ward, Costerfield, Moormbool West, Knowsley, Lady's Pass, Mount Camel and Redcastle are outliers and potentially can be forgotten due to being located so far from the heart and middle of the Ward. Maintaining the population catchment of 3523 Heathcote within one Ward (as per Models 1 & 2) reduces this risk as "one Heathcote community voice" is maintained.

Model 3 will require additional work for single Ward Councillors (Axedale & Eppalock) and staff to co-ordinate consultation and efforts to work across Ward boundaries to engage with residents who view themselves as belonging to the "Heathcote community". There is the potential to duplicate processes and a risk that remote rural communities become more isolated and not serviced or represented.

From the Heathcote and District community perspective, we present the argument to VEC to maintain our community identity and have representation from one Ward Councillor and engage with Council staff as “one-voice” rather than splitting the community into two Wards. Small rural towns are already challenged to advocate for services and resources. The creation of two Wards in our geographical identity/Heathcote community (as per Model 3) also increases the work of community-based organisations and volunteers who lead community advocacy work on behalf of the community.

Advance Heathcote Incorporated supports either Models 1 or 2 as options in the Greater Bendigo City Council’s electoral structure, in particular the Eppalock Ward proposed boundaries which maintain the Heathcote & District community identity and geographic locale that contributes to Heathcote’s regional identity and character.