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## VEC Electoral Review – City of Greater Geelong

The Combined Bellarine Community Associations (CBCA) represents nine community associations from the towns and villages on the Bellarine Peninsula: Drysdale - Clifton Springs - Curlewis, Portarlington, St Leonards, Indented Head, Ocean Grove, Barwon Heads, Breamlea and Point Lonsdale (which spans two Local Government Areas – Greater Geelong and the Borough of Queenscliffe), and Queenscliff (wholly in the Borough).

The CBCA submits the following:

### **1. A strong preference for retention of the current multi-councillor ward structure.**

While it is acknowledged that VEC's *Preliminary Report: Greater Geelong City Council* states that the Local Government Act 2020 requires Greater Geelong City Council, as a regional city, to have a single-councillor ward electoral structure, the CBCA wishes to establish a case for retention of the status quo.

- i. Currently voters elect 11 councillors from 4 wards. This system has been used in just two elections – 2017 and 2020 – and was put in place following a Commission of Inquiry in 2016 into Council's governance, administration and culture and which resulted in the appointment of Administrators 2016-2017. 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)

The CBCA and its member Associations strongly support the retention of the status quo as we believe that representation and governance have improved since the period of Administration and the resumption of Council elections in 2017. The CBCA argues that a return to the single councillor wards (in three different models) of the period 1995-2016 is a retrograde step, and is unlikely to lead to improved council and councillor accountability or community engagement. The 2016 Commission of Inquiry specifically noted that the single-councillor system had not served the City well, and that the shared representative responsibility of multi-councillor wards would improve Council performance.

- ii. The City of Greater Geelong is unlike most regional cities because of its size (1,252 sq km) and population (276,116 = est 2022). It has a substantial amount of rural land especially to the north and the east, as well as a growing urban centre. These characteristics, in addition to the City's history, warrant it being considered differently to the models stemming from the Local Government Act 2020. The CBCA notes that the adjacent Surf Coast Shire, classified rural, and with similar local economies and interests, has a wider range of ward structures available under the Act.
- iii. Since the 2017 election Councillors have reflected a community of interest within their wards, and the multi-councillor wards have enabled diversity of opinion and representation of a greater range of interests. We believe that this has had a very positive impact on the performance of councillors, in contrast to the years before 2017.

### **2. The change to single-councillor wards has particular impact on the Bellarine**

- i. The Bellarine Peninsula (currently one ward represented by three councillors) in particular has an established community of interest which has been emphasised by the declaration of the region as a

Distinctive Area and Landscape (DAL). The DAL includes also the Borough of Queenscliffe, and we note that the current three elected Bellarine Ward councillors have a good working relationship with the adjacent Borough.

The region encompassed by the DAL is quite different to the urban areas of Geelong City in that:

- The coastal settlements have retained a coastal village and township character
- The demographic characteristics of most parts of the Bellarine are quite different to other areas of Greater Geelong
- The environments and challenges are similar across the Bellarine and contrast with the challenges faced by urban Geelong
- The peninsula coastal areas will face shared coastal climate challenges

- ii. The Statement of Planning Policy for the Bellarine DAL is shortly to go before the Governor-In-Council. It is imperative that the Bellarine is recognised and retained as a geographical unit if it is to remain ‘a special place’ for at least the next 50 years, as is intended. The impressive work undertaken by DELWP/DEECA, the Bellarine communities and other stakeholders would be placed at risk by introducing single councillor wards across the Peninsula which will encourage competition between communities rather than collaboration to protect the special place that is the Bellarine.
- iii. The CBCA has been able to work collaboratively since 2017 to represent the Bellarine because the region has such clear communities of interest. We are dismayed that the changes required under the Act will threaten this positive collaboration, will split communities and potentially produce negative impacts on the City of Greater Geelong.
- iv. The unique coastal environment of the Bellarine presents challenges in managing it into the future. Many of the coastal communities on the Bellarine (eg Point Lonsdale, Barwon Heads, Ocean Grove, Indented Head, St Leonards, Portarlington) will face increasing threats to low lying areas of coastal inundation - due to climate change. This will require Government at all levels to work to ensure mitigation strategies are cohesive. A multi-councillor ward encompassing the Bellarine would ensure that elected Councillors would work together to face this challenge.

### **3. The three single-councillor models proposed by the VEC all pose significant challenges to the Bellarine region**

- i. Each model fails to effectively combine the small coastal townships and villages – which have a clear community of interest – in a single ward structure. In addition, the three models all fail to recognise important physical characteristics and features, and economic and social activity.
- ii. These small townships and villages are in some cases divided within, using boundaries which are arbitrary and chosen because of statistical convenience; they fail to recognise community of interest even on a township basis.
- iii. The analysis of these models, contained within the Preliminary Report, very clearly acknowledges these problems. The CBCA does not support any of the models proposed and requests that the VEC give further consideration to the proposed models to better reflect the communities of interest of the Bellarine townships.
- iv. The CBCA has encouraged each of its member associations to make submissions based on the ways in which the three models impact on their community. The fact that they each need to take this approach reflects exactly the divisive consequences of the proposed ward structures on Bellarine communities of interest.

**4. The ratio of councillors to voters, even where a 12 councillor model is chosen, significantly exceeds that of most other metropolitan Councils, and all rural Councils.**

This cannot be resolved without changing the boundaries of the City of Greater Geelong, and the Preliminary Report makes clear that this is not within the scope of the VEC review. However, the CBCA contends that multi-councillor wards manage this problem more successfully by a sharing of responsibility for good representation among councillors, and offer voters a greater diversity of representation.

#### **Conclusion**

The CBCA has written to the Minister for Local Government, the Hon Melissa Horne MP, requesting that:

- the Minister confirms the value of the current ward structure of the City of Greater Geelong, and initiates an amendment to the Local Government Act 2020 to enable the option of multi-councillor wards
- the Minister recommends that the electoral review for the City of Greater Geelong be extended for a further period of time to enable the above
- the Minister recommends that retention of the current ward structure for the 2024 Council election

The CBCA wishes to speak at the online public hearing in support of this submission, and to expand our views. The two CBCA spokespeople are:

Colin Bridges – CBCA Chair

[REDACTED]

Christine Kelly – CBCA Secretary

[REDACTED]