

ELECTORAL REPRESENTATION REVIEW
Strathbogie Shire Council
Final Report



19 October 2011

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Recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) recommends that Strathbogie Shire Council consist of seven councillors, to be elected from five wards, comprising two two-councillor wards and three single-councillor wards.

Background

Legislative basis

The *Local Government Act 1989* (the Act) requires the VEC to conduct an Electoral Representation Review of each municipality in Victoria at least every 12 years. The Act specifies that the purpose of a representation review is to recommend to the Minister for Local Government the number of councillors and the electoral structure for a municipality, which will provide 'fair and equitable representation for the persons who are entitled to vote at a general election of the Council'.¹

The Act requires the VEC, as part of an Electoral Representation Review, to consider:

- the number of councillors in a municipality;
- whether a municipality should be unsubdivided or subdivided;
- if it should be subdivided, whether ward boundaries:
 - provide for fair and equitable division of the municipality;
 - ensure equality of representation through the number of voters being represented by each councillor being within 10 per cent of the average number of voters represented by all councillors; and,
- if it should be subdivided, the number of councillors that should be elected for each ward.

The VEC and Electoral Representation Reviews

The VEC has conducted Electoral Representation Reviews since 2004 on appointment by local councils. The Act was changed in 2010 to define the VEC as the only agency authorised to undertake the reviews.

The VEC drew on its experience in mapping and boundary modelling and also engaged consultants with experience in local government to provide advice on specific local representation issues during the review.

¹ Section 219D of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Profile of Strathbogie Shire

The Shire of Strathbogie was formed in 1994 by the amalgamation of parts of the Shires of Euroa, Goulburn, Violet Town, and Mclvor, and part of the Rural City of Seymour. The Shire includes the major towns of Avenel, Euroa, Nagambie and Violet Town.

At the 2006 census, the Shire recorded a population of 9,294 people. Over the next ten years, the population is projected to grow by 4.61 per cent.

Current electoral structure

The last electoral representation review for Strathbogie Shire Council took place in 2004. Following the review, the Minister for Local Government determined that the structure of Strathbogie Shire Council would be:

- seven councillors;
- divided into six wards — Goulburn Weir Ward, Honeysuckle Creek Ward, Hughes Creek Ward, Lake Nagambie Ward, Mount Wombat Ward, and Seven Creeks Ward;
- with two councillors for Seven Creeks Ward and one councillor for each of the remaining wards.

Before the 2004 representation review, the Council comprised seven single-councillor wards. The VEC recommended the change to achieve better compliance with communities of interest: the two wards covering Euroa were combined in one two-councillor Seven Creeks Ward, and Lake Nagambie Ward was expanded to include the rural hinterland around the town. In reaching this recommendation, the VEC took account of the fact that in 2002, after a public consultation process, the Shire's electoral structure had changed from a five-councillor unsubdivided municipality to seven single-councillor wards. The VEC recognised the need for stability and consistency, and the strong public wish for a ward structure. However, the VEC pointed out the advantages of diversity and choice offered by an unsubdivided Council elected by proportional representation.

The electoral representation review process

The VEC proceeded on the basis of three main principles:

1. **Ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that municipality.**

Populations are continually changing. Over time these changes can lead to some wards having larger or smaller numbers of voters. As part of the review, the VEC

corrected any imbalances and also took into account likely population changes to ensure these boundaries provide equitable representation until the next review.

2. Taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors.

The VEC was guided by its comparisons of municipalities of a similar size and category to the council under review. The VEC also considered any special circumstances that may warrant the municipality to have more or fewer councillors than similar municipalities.

3. Ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

Each municipality contains a number of communities of interest and, where practicable, the electoral structure should be designed to take these into account. This allows elected councillors to be more effective representatives of the people in their particular municipality or ward.

The recommendation is based on:

- internal research specifically relating to the municipality under review;
- VEC experience from its work with other municipalities and in similar reviews for State elections;
- VEC expertise in mapping, demography and local government;
- careful consideration of all public input in the form of written and verbal submissions received during the review; and,
- advice received from consultants with wide experience in local government.

Public submissions were an important part of the process, but were not the only consideration during the review. The VEC seeks to combine the information gathered through public submissions with its own research and analysis of other factors, such as the need to give representation to communities of interest. The recommendation is not based on a 'straw poll' of the number of submissions supporting a particular option.

VEC research

In addition to the information provided in submissions, the VEC created a profile of the municipality based on population trends, development projections and demographic indicators. The VEC used the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census community profiles, the Department of Planning and Community Development projections and voter statistics from the Victorian electoral roll. The VEC also undertook field work to view current and possible boundaries for each of the options presented in the preliminary report to evaluate their effectiveness.

Public involvement

The VEC values the local knowledge and perspectives presented by the public in written submissions. The public were given two opportunities to provide submissions during the review. Their input was considered by the panel in forming the options in the preliminary report and they were also invited to respond to these options. In addition, a public hearing was held to enable people to speak in support of their submissions and supplement it with information.

To ensure transparency in the process, all written submissions were published on the VEC website and all verbal submissions were heard at a public hearing.

To raise awareness of the review and encourage the public to engage with the process, a full public information campaign was undertaken.

Advertising

In accordance with sections 219F(4) and 219F(7) of the Act, the VEC ensured public notices were placed in local newspapers.

Notification of the review appeared in the *Euroa Gazette* and *Seymour Nagambie Advertiser* on 5 July 2011, the *Seymour Telegraph* and *Benalla Ensign* on 6 July and the *Shepparton News* on 8 July. The notice detailed the process for the review and called for public submissions. A general notice covering several reviews was printed in *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* on 5 July 2011.

Notification of the release of the preliminary report appeared in the *Euroa Gazette* and *Seymour Nagambie Advertiser* on 23 August 2011, the *Seymour Telegraph* and *Benalla Ensign* on 24 August and the *Shepparton News* on 26 August. The notice detailed the options contained in the preliminary report, including a map of each option, instructions on how to access a copy of the preliminary report and how to make a submission in response to the report.

Media releases

The VEC produced two media releases for this review. The first release, distributed on 5 July 2011, provided information on the review and overall process. A second release, distributed on 23 August, detailed the options in the preliminary report and how to make a submission in response to the report.

Public information session

The VEC held a public information session for people interested in the review process on 18 July 2011 at the Council offices in Euroa.

Information brochure and poster

An information brochure was provided to the Council to be distributed to residents through the Council's network, such as in libraries and service centres. A poster was provided to the Council to be displayed in public spaces.

Helpline

A dedicated helpline was established to assist with public enquiries concerning the review process.

VEC website

The VEC website delivered up-to-date information to provide transparency during the preliminary and response stages of the review process. All submissions were posted on the website and an online submission tool was created to facilitate the submission process. The preliminary report was available for electronic download on the website.

Guide for Submissions

A *Guide for Submissions* was developed and distributed to those interested in making submissions. Copies of the *Guide for Submissions* were available on the VEC website, in hard copy on request, and were provided to the Council.

Preliminary report

In accordance with the requirements of the Act, the VEC produced a preliminary report outlining its preferred option and two alternative options for Strathbogie Shire Council. The report was released on 23 August 2011.

Preliminary submissions

By the close of preliminary submissions at 5.00pm on 5 August 2011, the VEC received 17 preliminary submissions.

There was a majority preference to reduce the number of councillors to five with an unsubdivided council. This was Strathbogie Shire Council's original structure, and was changed largely because of the consequences of the exhaustive preferential vote counting system that applied at that time. Several submitters believed that, with proportional representation now applying, there would be no objection to a return to an unsubdivided structure.

Arguments for an unsubdivided structure with five councillors covered three main areas: the particular characteristics of the Shire of Strathbogie, the general advantages of an unsubdivided model, and the dynamics of elections. Submitters noted that Strathbogie Shire has a small, ageing population and high rates. They argued that the Council needed to economise wherever possible, that five councillors would be enough for Strathbogie, and that an unsubdivided structure would end the need for costly boundary reviews and by-elections. Moreover, they maintained that the ward-based structure had hindered Council from taking a broad approach to its work, particularly in relation to an economic development strategy. Submitters considered that an unsubdivided structure would encourage a municipality-wide approach which would benefit the Shire as a whole. In general, an unsubdivided structure would enable all voters to vote for all candidates, and would give ratepayers a choice of councillors to approach. Submitters also contended that a Shire-wide election would give voters a broader and better choice of candidates. In a small rural community, single-councillor wards can discourage electoral contests, which can become a personal attack on an individual and result in an embarrassing loss for one of the candidates. A shire-wide election would not be a head-to-head contest, and candidates would not be deterred from nominating.

The Council's submission was the only one to put the case for the current structure. The submission stated that the spread of population and number of communities in the Shire justified retaining seven councillors, and that a reduction would create a risk of not achieving a quorum at Council meetings. The submission argued that small communities identify with their wards, and that

councillors act as advocates for communities within their wards. The submission proposed substantial changes to ward boundaries to better fit communities of interest and allow for population changes, and the creation of a two-councillor ward covering the growing town of Nagambie.

A list of submitters, by name, is available in Appendix One. Copies of the submissions can be viewed on the VEC website vec.vic.gov.au.

Preliminary options

The VEC considers that similar types of municipality of a similar size should have the same number of councillors, unless special circumstances justify a variation.

In terms of number of voters, Strathbogie is on the cusp between seven and five-councillor shires. The Shire of Mansfield, which is larger in voters and area than Strathbogie, has five councillors, while three municipalities with fewer voters than Strathbogie have seven councillors. The fact that Strathbogie has alternated between five and seven councillors indicates how finely balanced it is.

Several submissions contended that, with only 9,000 residents, Strathbogie did not need more than five councillors. Submitters were concerned about the Shire's financial circumstances, believed every effort should be made to restrain costs, and saw a reduction in the number of councillors as a contribution to restraint.

In contrast, the council submission stated that 'The spread of population across the Shire and the number of communities of interest suggests that the current number of Councillors adequately represent voters' needs'. The Council was concerned that any reduction in the number would leave the Council open to the risk of not achieving a quorum due to Councillor interests, illness or leave of absence.

In relation to the cost implications of reducing the number of councillors, the VEC considers the representation of voters rather than financial matters. (In any case, a reduction to five councillors would have only a small effect on Council expenditure.) The key question is whether five councillors are enough to provide fair and equitable representation for the voters of Strathbogie Shire. Information from previous representation reviews suggests that councils can function satisfactorily with five councillors, and that lack of a quorum has not been an issue. At the time of the 2002 Council review, public opinion was divided between five and seven councillors, and the Council believed that five councillors were adequate to meet the demands of the municipality given its area and

population 2. Strathbogie Shire is not enormous geographically, with an area of 3,302 square kilometres compared to a median for rural shires of 3,953 square kilometres. Strathbogie's population is comparatively small and growing slowly, and is stable and relatively homogeneous. For Strathbogie Shire Council, the challenges of representation would not be as great as in a municipality that was developing rapidly or one that was ethnically diverse. A change to five councillors would increase the number of voters per councillor to 1,854, which would be comparable to many rural municipalities and would still be lower than the Shire of Mansfield's 1,973 voters per councillor.

On balance, the VEC considered that five is now the most appropriate number of councillors for Strathbogie Shire. However, the VEC believed that seven councillors would also provide fair and equitable representation, and proposed two seven-councillor alternative options.

The second question was whether the Shire of Strathbogie should be unsubdivided or divided into wards. Strathbogie was an unsubdivided municipality from 1997 to 2003 and has had a (mainly single-councillor) ward-based structure since 2003. There are strong arguments for both structures.

The great majority of preliminary submissions supported a change to an unsubdivided structure. Most of the submitters' arguments were general: that every voter would be able to express a preference for every candidate; that ratepayers would have a choice of councillors to approach with their concerns; that councillors would be encouraged to focus on the municipality as a whole. These are all valid points. However, it is important to examine the nature of the Shire and how representation has worked in it.

Euroa is the largest town in the Shire of Strathbogie and is the location of the Shire offices, but does not dominate the municipality in the same way as the main towns of neighbouring, unsubdivided municipalities such as Benalla, Wangaratta and Shepparton. Rather than consisting of a large town with a rural hinterland, Strathbogie is made up of a group of small, distinct communities. Nagambie's economy is largely based on wine and tourism; Euroa and Violet Town are local service centres; and the hill country around Strathbogie and Ruffy appears to be becoming a 'tree changer' area. Only minor roads connect Nagambie and the Goulburn Valley with the rest of the Shire. The Shire does not have a united media, with the Euroa Gazette covering part of the Shire while newspapers based in Seymour, Benalla and Shepparton cover parts. These features suggest that a

² Strathbogie Shire Council Chief Executive Officer to Minister for Local Government, 11 September 2002 (cc to Electoral Commissioner).

ward-based structure reflecting local geographic communities of interest may fit Strathbogie.

On the other hand, census statistics indicate that the various localities in the Shire are demographically very similar. The whole Shire faces the common challenge of economic development in a context of slow growth, a small, ageing population and a small and relatively static rate base. Several submitters argued passionately that an economic development strategy had been jeopardised because of ward councillors being more concerned with parochial matters and that under an unsubdivided structure councillors would focus on the good of the Shire as a whole.

One of the positive features of single-councillor wards is that councillors will know their own wards intimately and will take up local issues. However, two submitters, from Kirwans Bridge and from Baxter's Road, Goulburn Weir, argued that their local councillor had not been able to achieve anything for their area. These submitters preferred an unsubdivided model.

An unsubdivided structure expands choice for voters. One of the potential problems with single-councillor wards, especially in the country, is that voters may be deprived of a wide choice. As the Honourable Patrick McNamara stated in his submission:

In a small rural community with one vacancy to a ward, it discourages electoral contests, as they become a personal attack on a sitting councillor, and an embarrassing loss for one individual. I feel good quality people are discouraged from such contests, but they may be more willing to put themselves forward in a municipal wide contest for 5 positions, where it is not a head to head contest.

In most ward elections since 2003, there has been a limited choice of candidates (one more than the number of vacancies) or no choice at all. In 2005, three of the six wards were uncontested. Experience since 2003 suggests that, under an unsubdivided model, the number of candidates would be manageable, instead of there being so many candidates that voters would make numbering errors, increasing the informal vote.

At the time of the 2002 Council review that led to the change to single-councillor wards, residents were concerned about representation of local communities but also about the voting system. Under the exhaustive preferential system that applied at that time, one candidate who gained the second largest number of votes was repeatedly defeated, while candidates who obtained far fewer votes were elected. Residents reacted against the perceived injustice of this system and saw single-councillor wards as a way of preventing such anomalous results. Now

proportional representation applies in multi-councillor elections, and any candidate gaining a quota of votes ($1/6 + 1$ for an unsubdivided five-member council) would be elected. In the 2004 electoral representation review, the VEC recognised the public desire for stability and consistency in governance after a turbulent period, and recommended a structure of seven councillors to be elected from six wards. Seven years later, the VEC considered it was appropriate to reconsider the merits of an unsubdivided structure.

Taking into account the common features and challenges facing the Shire and the wider choice for voters and constituents, the VEC's preferred option was for an unsubdivided municipality. However, in the light of the localised nature of the Shire, the VEC also put forward a ward-based alternative.

At present there is a two-councillor ward covering Euroa and five single-councillor wards. The current ward boundaries do not comply with the requirements of the Local Government Act on equality of numbers, with enrolment for one ward outside the permitted 10 per cent variation from the average. In some areas the boundaries are very clear, but they cut across communities of interest. For instance, the boundary between Honeysuckle Creek Ward (based on Violet Town) and Mount Wombat Ward is the Hume Freeway, cutting off Violet Town residents on the other side of the Freeway.

The Council submission proposed ward boundaries that dealt with some of these issues. Under the Council model, the Honeysuckle Creek Ward was expanded to include the area east of the Hume Freeway, and the Seven Creeks Ward included some of Euroa's hinterland. The Council proposed combining Lake Nagambie and Goulburn Weir Wards to create a two-councillor Lake Nagambie Ward. Nagambie is growing faster than the rest of the Shire, and a single-councillor Lake Nagambie Ward would grow beyond the 10 per cent tolerance in the next few years.

Grouping Nagambie with its rural hinterland solved this problem.

One difficulty with the Council model was that enrolment for the Mount Wombat Ward was above the 10 per cent tolerance. As well, the proposed boundaries for the Hughes Creek Ward were problematic. Avenel would be the main town of the ward, but the proposed boundary followed the Hume Freeway and approached the edge of the built-up area, splitting the community of interest in the same way as the current boundary does near Violet Town. The ward was almost divided in two near Locksley, and the northern part of the proposed ward appeared to have little in common with the rest of the ward.

The VEC proposed a modification of the Council model. Under the VEC's proposal, the Hughes Creek Ward would be centred on Avenel, including the

valley of Hughes Creek as far as Tarcombe. This change would bring enrolments for Mount Wombat Ward back within tolerance. The north and east of the Council's Hughes Creek Ward would be split between Seven Creeks Ward (taking the district close to Euroa) and Lake Nagambie Ward (taking the district close to the Goulburn River). The VEC considered that these proposed boundaries complied with legislative requirements for enrolment equality at present and for the future, and fitted with communities of interest.

The VEC attempted a subdivided model with five councillors, but found that the boundaries were unsatisfactory.

The preliminary report recommended three options:

Option A (Preferred Option): That Strathbogie Shire Council consist of five councillors, to be elected from an unsubdivided municipality.

Option B (Alternative Option): That Strathbogie Shire Council consist of seven councillors, to be elected from an unsubdivided municipality.

Option C (Alternative Option): That Strathbogie Shire Council consist of seven councillors, to be elected from five wards, comprising two two-councillor wards and three single-councillor wards.

Public response

Response submissions

Response submissions on the Electoral Representation Review of Strathbogie Shire Council opened on 23 August 2011 and closed at 5.00pm on 23 September 2011. Fourteen response submissions were received. Table 1 shows the levels of support for each option based on the preferences expressed in each response submission.

Table 1: Preferences expressed in response submissions for each option

Option A	Option B	Option C
4	2	9

The Proportional Representation Society supported both Options A and B and its submission has been counted for both options.

Analysis of submissions

Submissions came from all over the Shire, though there were noticeably fewer from the Nagambie area and more from Euroa than at the first stage of the review. Submissions were lodged by five individual councillors as well as the Council itself. A majority of submissions supported a ward-based structure.

Supporters of an unsubdivided structure stressed the common interests that bound the Shire together. In their view, the advantages of a return to an unsubdivided council were that it would end parochial divisions, encourage a municipality-wide outlook, and give voters a wide choice of candidates and councillors. Most of these submissions saw an unsubdivided structure with a reduction to five councillors as a way of cutting costs – something that was particularly desirable given the Shire’s financial position. On the other hand, Cr Swan’s submission, supporting Option B, argued for the retention of seven councillors on the ground that this would prevent councillors from being overworked and would encourage collaborative representation.

Supporters of a ward-based structure stressed the diversity of the Shire. In their view, the various communities had comparatively little to do with each other, and locally based representation best suited these communities. They were concerned that a change to an unsubdivided structure would lead to the smaller outlying communities losing representation, and that the Council would be dominated by people from the main centres of Euroa and Nagambie. They argued that the cost

of campaigning across the whole Shire would deter candidates, and so there would not really be a wider choice in an election.

A list of submitters, by name, is available in Appendix 1. Copies of the submissions can be viewed on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au.

Public hearing

A public hearing was held at 6.30pm on Wednesday, 28 September 2011 in the Council Conference Room, Council Offices, corner of Binney and Bury Streets, Euroa. Everyone who had made a submission was given an opportunity to speak at the public hearing. There were 11 speakers, including six councillors, three ex-councillors, the Hon. Patrick McNamara and a spokesman for the Violet Town Action Group. Members of the public were invited to attend and 14 people, including the speakers, were present.

Speakers largely reiterated the points they had made in their written submissions, though with additional information. The VEC panel asked questions of the speakers to learn more about their position and about their response to differing points of view.

The review conducted by the VEC is purely concerned with the electoral structure of the Shire as it now stands. Accordingly, comments such as that by Mr Robin Weatherald that he intended to stand at the next election on a platform of closing the Shire down, and a comment by several speakers that a group based in Nagambie wanted Nagambie to break away from Strathbogie Shire and join Shepparton, are not matters that the VEC is concerned about in the review.

One speaker stated that the VEC's publication of a preferred option in the Preliminary Report had given the impression that its mind was made up, and another speaker accused the VEC panel of bias favouring an unsubdivided municipality in its questioning of speakers. The VEC is obliged by law to present a preferred option in its preliminary reports, but all of the options that the VEC includes in its reports are workable and comply with the aims of a representation review. In 42% of the reviews between 2004 and 2008, the VEC's final recommendation differed from its preliminary preferred option, in response to information and arguments presented in submissions and at public hearings. The VEC will continue to conduct representation reviews in an impartial manner.

Findings and Recommendation

Number of councillors

Councillors have two main functions: to act as representatives of the voters, and, as the Council, to be decision makers working for the benefit of the municipality. The VEC's review is concerned with representation, but the two roles of councillors are often interrelated. Strathbogie Shire's financial position shaped many of the submissions to the VEC.

For supporters of a five-councillor model, Strathbogie Shire's difficult financial situation made it all the more important that it have the minimum number of councillors. In their view, a small governing body is better at making difficult but necessary decisions. Mr Weatherald at the public hearing stated that the three commissioners in the 1990s acted more effectively because they did not have to compromise. The Hon Patrick McNamara favoured a small council acting decisively like the board of a business. The advocates of five councillors believed that the increase to seven councillors (plus the change to a ward-based structure) had hindered effective decision making at a critical time for the Shire.

On the other hand, supporters of the current structure argued that the Council had made the hard decisions. The Council had agreed on a plan that involved steep rate rises, had gone back to their constituents to explain the plan, and expected the Shire to be in the black by 2014.

For the VEC, the key question is the appropriate number of councillors best able to represent the voters of Strathbogie Shire. Ms Elizabeth Seach of Longwood believed that:

Five councillors are adequate to deliver fair and equitable governance over a shire with a small, ageing and relatively staid population, which is not expected to increase significantly in the immediate future. Similar councils function adequately with only five councillors.

In contrast, the Council submission maintained that 'The spread of population across the Shire and the number of communities of interest suggests that the current number of Councillors adequately represent voters' needs'. The Council pointed out that the number of voters per councillor in Strathbogie is comparable to similar sized municipalities such as Loddon, Pyrenees and Gannawarra. The Council (and also Cr Furlanetto) warned that any reduction in the number of councillors would leave Council open to the risk of not achieving a quorum due to councillors' direct or indirect conflicts of interest, illness or leave of absence. Cr

Debra Swan argued that a change in the style of representation made it important to retain seven councillors:

In the past when it was 5 councillors there was not much email and councillors were less accessible, they tended to be more traditional strategic boards with top down governance. In today's society I believe it is more important than ever to be collaborative in our decision making and this takes time and energy. I do not believe you will achieve quality candidates if this burden is increased, the burn out will create stressed, ill informed and ineffective representation. This might work in a shire with only one main centre of interest and a single direction of development but would simply not work in Strathbogie shire. I believe small rural shires that are conscious of saving dollars do a lot more hands on work with the community and there is already a high expectation on councillors to be available on demand. I believe if we are to provide quality collaborative representation to match the community needs in a shire with many diverse towns and differing needs it would be irresponsible to only provide 5 councillors both from a work load and a community needs perspective.

The VEC's Preliminary Report opted for five councillors, but recognised that there was a strong case for seven councillors. The VEC's general approach is that five councillors are appropriate only for the smallest rural councils. In terms of numbers of voters, Strathbogie Shire fits more at the bottom of the seven-councillor band of shires than at the top of the five-councillor band. In light of information received about the number of small communities to be represented and the style of representation in Strathbogie Shire, the VEC now considers that seven is the appropriate number of councillors for Strathbogie Shire Council.

Electoral structure

At the Preliminary Report stage, the arguments for an unsubdivided municipality and for a ward-based structure were finely balanced. This was still the case for the second stage of the review.

Some of the arguments for an unsubdivided structure are undeniable: voters would have a choice of all the candidates for Council, and councillors would be directly accountable to all the voters. Election results would closely follow the way in which voters across the whole shire had voted, with fewer 'wasted votes' (votes which did not contribute to the election of a councillor). Mr Gregory Carlson at the public hearing argued that under an unsubdivided structure, elections would be a genuine contest of ideas on shire-wide issues. On the cost of shire-wide campaigns, Mr Weatherald pointed to some relatively low-cost ways in which he

had campaigned at unsubdivided elections. Cr Swan's submission stated that she had

often felt handicapped by the inability to have input to the representation from other wards who will still make decisions on my patch of the world...loss of face to face contact with the shire has made Nagambie residents and, I suspect other outer lying towns and communities, feel disenfranchised in the decision making process. This effect is compounded by their perceived inability to lobby councillors across the shire that, are not accountable for their actions to communities outside their ward.

Cr Swan thought that an unsubdivided structure would encourage all councillors to represent and be accountable to all communities.

Many of the supporters of wards were concerned that an unsubdivided structure would enable one group to seize control of the Council, or that the Council would be monopolised by Euroa and Nagambie tickets to the exclusion of smaller communities. These fears seem to be exaggerated. The way in which proportional representation works would prevent one group from controlling the Council unless that was what a majority of voters wanted. The Mayor, Cr Mick Williams, stated at the public hearing that after the 1997 Strathbogie Shire Council election, which was for an unsubdivided municipality, there were two councillors from Nagambie and one each from Longwood, Miepoll and Euroa. This shows that an unsubdivided structure will not necessarily favour the major towns. Cr Williams, the Euroa-based councillor, was delegated at that time to look after Violet Town. His role in 1997 accords with Cr Swan's proposal at the public hearing of a portfolio system for an unsubdivided council, under which councillors would be allocated smaller communities to look after. In the current Council, four councillors are from Euroa (though Cr Murray, who represents Mount Wombat Ward, lives in the part of Euroa that is in that ward) and one each are from Violet Town, Avenel and Kirwans Bridge.³ Thus a ward-based structure does not necessarily prevent most councillors coming from the major towns, though of course they can still be effective representatives of their wards.

The Violet Town Action Group's (VTAG) submission pointed to the valuable work that the Group does, and stated that the connection between such groups and official representatives such as the councillors was crucial, and that the ward model enhanced this relationship. The voluntary work performed by community action groups is clearly important for the Shire, and recently a meeting of

³ Information from Strathbogie Shire Council website, downloaded 6 October 2011.

combined action groups in Euroa discussed common issues.⁴ At the public hearing, Mr Glynn, the spokesman for the VTAG, stated that the group dealt with the Council both directly and through their ward councillor. This evidence suggests that action groups would still be able to function without a ward system.

What the action groups clearly demonstrate is the strength of local community sentiment. Strathbogie Shire is made up of a series of small, self-contained communities. Cr Neil Murray at the public hearing stated that his Mount Wombat Ward was a high rainfall area and that 52 per cent of his constituents were absentee landowners, and that his constituents had very different attitudes and issues from the people on the plains. In his submission, Cr Howard Myers of Honeysuckle Creek Ward observed that 'I did not know any of the other first term councillor before being elected, and had very little to do with any of the other communities at all, despite being considered a community leader by many in my local community'. Mr Weatherald at the public hearing said that people tended to stay in their own area, and that few would routinely travel from Euroa to Nagambie, for example. Strathbogie Shire has no large centre; for important business needs, residents travel outside the Shire to towns such as Shepparton or Benalla.

Many submissions and speakers advocated the merits of local representation, on the grounds of the diversity of the Shire, or that it was supported by the people, or for the sake of stability. The Mayor at the public hearing pointed to examples of ward councillors acting as effective advocates for their communities, helping to stop a toxic waste dump near Violet Town and a low security Aboriginal prison at Teneriffe. Mr David Arnold of Violet Town believed that the ward system encouraged residents of a community to work together to achieve consensus, and councillors to represent the interests of their whole community.

Regarding breadth of choice at ward-based elections, speakers at the public hearing pointed out that there was a reasonable choice at the 2008 election, with only one uncontested ward and at least two candidates in all other wards.

An unsubdivided structure would be unlikely to have the dire consequences predicted by some of its opponents, and would have the potential to widen the vision of voters and councillors. Nevertheless, an unsubdivided structure would appear to go against the nature of Strathbogie Shire. The Shire consists of small, separate communities, and the structure that best reflects this character is a ward-based one. Therefore the VEC has decided to recommend a ward-based structure.

⁴ *Euroa Gazette*, 27 September 2011, p. 5.

Ward boundaries

The legislative requirement for approximate equality in the number of voters per councillor makes it difficult to devise ward boundaries that comply perfectly with communities of interest. At the public hearing, the VEC panel asked most speakers for their views on whether the proposed boundaries in Option C of the Preliminary Report fitted communities of interest. Mr Weatherald said that the proposed Lake Nagambie Ward was diffuse, stretching more than halfway across the Shire from the dry country around Graytown in the far west to Castle Creek in the east. The Hon. Pat McNamara stated that the boundary of Seven Creeks Ward (based on Euroa) is very close to the town on the eastern side, and that Longwood (in Hughes Creek Ward) is closer to Euroa than to Avenel (the main centre of Hughes Creek Ward). Mr McNamara is correct on these points. Still, most speakers thought that the proposed boundaries fitted communities of interest reasonably well, and were an improvement on the current boundaries.

It is true that the Lake Nagambie Ward would be the largest in area in the Shire. However, it would have two councillors to represent it, and would be more compact than the current Goulburn Weir Ward, which nearly reaches the edge of Euroa. Cr Swan stated that although the Lake Nagambie Ward was large, it was centred on Nagambie and so fell within Nagambie's community of interest.

The VEC considers that the ward boundaries in Option C of the Preliminary Report provide for an equitable division of the municipality and fit the communities of interest within the Shire.

Recommendation

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) recommends that Strathbogie Shire Council consist of seven councillors, to be elected from five wards, comprising two two-councillor wards and three single-councillor wards.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. H. Tully', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

S. H. Tully

Electoral Commissioner

Appendix 1: List of submitters

Preliminary submissions were received from:

Name
Carlson, Gregory
Chalmers, Robert
Gallant, Robyn
Howell, Neville
Kriekenbeek, Nedra
McNamara, Patrick
Morrison, Dave
Moss, Margaret and Henry
Ough, Darren
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.
Purbrick, Alister
Rees, Catherine
Robinson, Helen
Robinson, Peter and Rhonda
Strathbogie Shire Council
Walter, Elizabeth and Mike
Weatherald, Robin

Response submissions were received from:

Name
Arnold, David
Carlson, Gregory*
Furlanetto, Colleen*
Little, Malcolm*
Murray, Neil*
Myers, Howard*
O'Connor, William*
Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.
Seach, Elizabeth
Strathbogie Shire Council*
Swan, Debra*
Violet Town Action Group*
Weatherald, Robin*
Weinmann, Erwin

Note: * indicates a submitter speaking at the public hearing on 28 September. The Hon. Patrick McNamara also spoke at the public hearing, having requested to do so in his preliminary submission.

Appendix 2: Map

Strathbogie Shire Council

Map of Recommended Option - Seven Councillors, Five Wards

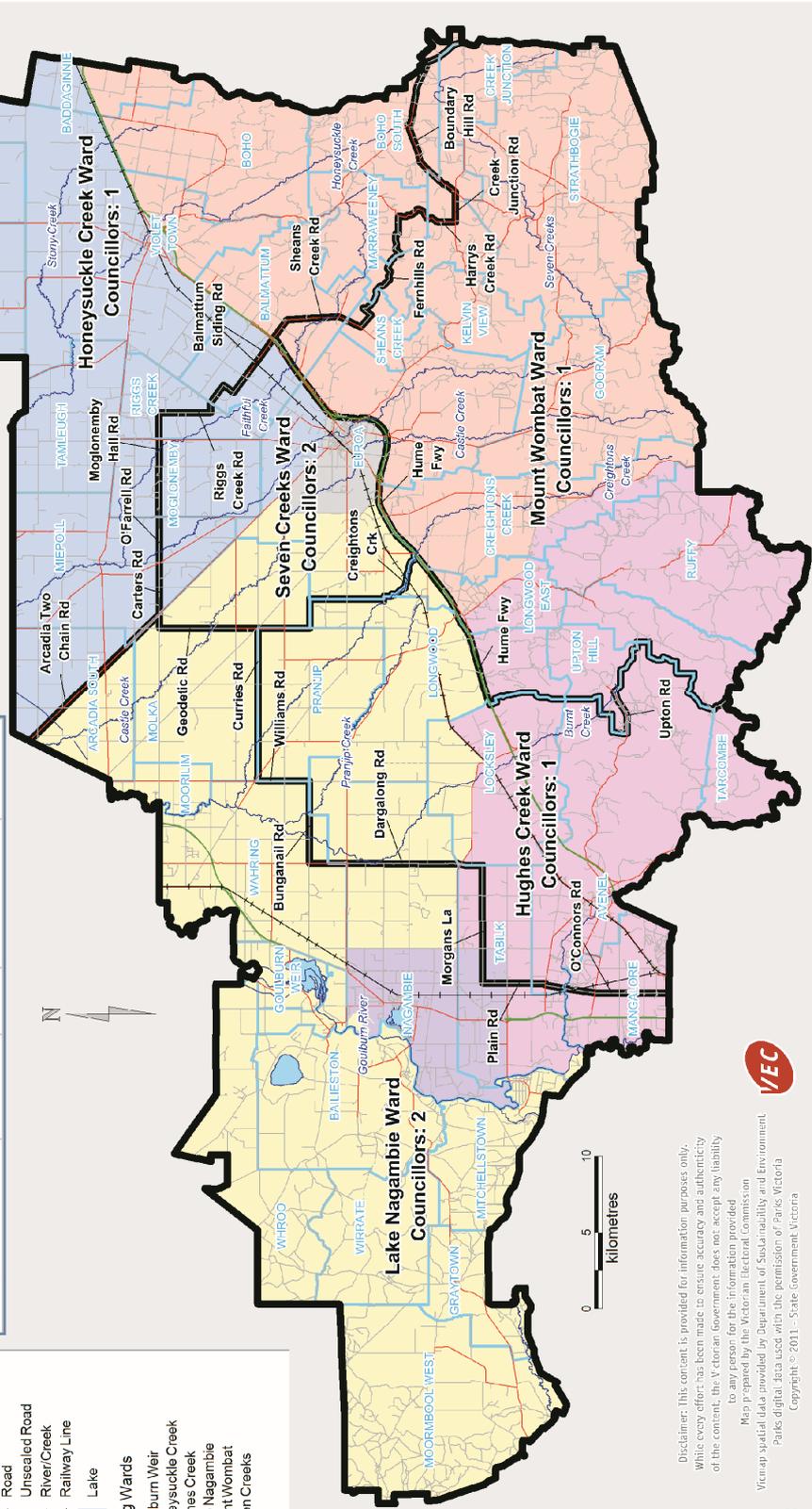
Legend

- Proposed Ward
- Locality Boundary
- Proposed Boundary & Locality Boundary
- Map Symbols
- Freeway
- Main Road
- Collector Road
- Road
- Unsealed Road
- River/Creek
- Railway Line
- Lake

Existing Wards

- Goulburn Weir
- Honeysuckle Creek
- Hughes Creek
- Lake Nagambie
- Mount Wombat
- Seven Creeks

Ward	Councillors	Voters	Deviation	area_sqkm
Honeysuckle Creek	1	1,357	+2.49%	827.4
Hughes Creek	1	1,268	-4.23%	515.65
Lake Nagambie	2	2,547	-3.81%	918.96
Mount Wombat	1	1,368	+3.32%	817.89
Seven Creeks	2	2,728	+3.02%	222.28
Totals for all Electorates	7	9,268	-4.23% to +3.32%	3,302.18
Average		1,324		660.44



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Map prepared by the Victorian Electoral Commission

Vicmap spatial data provided by Department of Sustainability and Environment

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