

John Fryer

Leading Firefighter Country Fire Authority

Mornington Fire Station

859 Napean Hwy Mornington 3931

Assistant Clerk Committees

Fire Service Bill Select Committee

Dear Sir/Ma'am.

I write this letter to you to help you obtain a true insight into Victoria's current fire services and the need for modernisation.

My insight into Fire Services has been through a long serving fire fighter role both as a volunteer and professional Firefighter with the Country Fire Authority spanning beyond 30 years. I feel this experience places myself in a good position to offer my opinion for your consideration.

Firstly I would like to point out that it's been approximately 5 decades since the last review of Fire Service boundaries and that alone should be ringing bells at government levels that the current model is well "out of date".

Victoria's Capital and regional cities have grown significantly in this time and the fire services have not changed beyond boundaries specified from mid last century. Areas that were considered rural back then now have as high a population density as what was then classified as Melbourne's fire district. The MFB has developed a professional high level response system to cover its district to this day whereas urban areas that have developed beyond their boundaries and are covered by the CFA have even with much recent modernisation fallen far short of the MFB model.

Given the Fire Service Levy paid by all Victorians I believe those that live within a developed urban area should receive coverage to the same standard as those that fall within the out dated boundary line covered by the MFB.

The current MFB model responds two heavy urban fire fighting appliances staffed by 7-8 firefighters all holding the correct competencies for their given role. The crew will consist of a mix of ranks to ensure that both the "management of" and "hands on" tasking necessary at the incident can occur. If more personnel and equipment are required to combat an incident more appliances and crews can be dispatched and the Incident Controller is guaranteed the equipment and personnel required and the timeframe it will take for those resources to arrive on scene and also the rank and skill competencies crewing on those appliances.

In comparison the current response within the CFA area is for the two nearest brigades to be dispatched. Assuming one of those brigades is an integrated brigade, their heavy urban appliance

and a professional crew of 4 firefighters with all the correct competencies and rank mix will respond. The second brigade may be either a volunteer urban or a rural brigade and as such may or may not have the correct appliance to respond. That brigade being reliant on volunteers may or may not respond within the allocated timeframe and even if it does it may or may not have the correct crewing with the correct competencies and rank mix to adequately be able to manage the incident at hand.

Also even if the second brigade is of urban classification they may have either a light, medium or heavy appliance all of which have differing limitations/abilities on their water pumping capacity and equipment carried.

Often in my career a rural (bush fire) appliance with as few as 1 crew member on board has responded as a support appliance to an urban style incident. Also I would like to point out that often NO response what so ever has occurred. When this happens the dispatch centre must wait 6 minutes before deeming a non-response and dispatching another brigade that may or may not respond.

I'm sure you can see the Victorian public requires/deserves better protection. But I would also like to point out the situation it leaves the professional crew in when the support crew either doesn't arrive or arrives too late or without the correct crewing, competencies and equipment.

The first crew will initiate fire ground tactics to combat the incident. With only four personnel to mitigate all dangers they may encounter to themselves before being able to safely assist the public in need. Once those dangers have been satisfactorily mitigated the crew will then go through a process to combat the incident, this process can take many forms depending on the incident at hand. Often in urban environments the crews are required to wear breathing apparatus as well as personal structural protective equipment. Whilst working in this gear even moderate physical output becomes extremely challenging. The contents of our breathing apparatus cylinders allows for approximately 20-25 minutes of working time before being required to exit to a safe environment to remove our mask before being depleted of air. By this stage even the youngest and fittest of Firefighters requires a rest period before re-entering. If you find yourselves in doubt of the difficulty of working in this level of personnel equipment PLEASE just go to the nearest station and ask to be attired in this equipment and just walk casually on their gym treadmill for 20 minutes, I'm sure you will attain a new appreciation for the short amount of time it takes for a firefighter to become exhausted.

Now keeping in mind that there will still be work to be completed to render a structure that has even only partially been involved in fire safe, if a second crew with the correct equipment and competencies is not already established on scene' the original crew will have to re-enter the structure. Without the proper period of rest time for a Firefighter to expel built up metabolic heat, rehydrate and restore sufficient energy reserves to again embark on such a demanding physical task is an increase in risk that should be avoided.

In many cases a fully volunteer brigade will not meet this timeframe and even if they do there again is no guarantee that it will have 2 qualified and competent breathing apparatus wearers in there crew make up. This unfortunately does not show up in the statistics gathered and has a huge impact on the fire ground management even though they may have met with service delivery standards by

arriving in a fire fighting appliance within a predetermined time even if it is not the correct appliance type with insufficient crew competencies. To further explain this a volunteer brigade may meet predetermined service delivery standards just by 1 member arriving in a brigade vehicle that is not a fire fighting appliance (IE: 4x4 car) and that member may only hold the most basic bushfire skills that have no bearing on the incident he/she is confronted with.

Also a volunteer that does possess the competencies to partake in urban related incidents is not governed by a minimum physical standard. I recall being teamed up with a volunteer to conduct an internal fire attack on a structure fire and donning our breathing apparatus at the appliance parked on the street, by the time we walked to the back door this individual told me they weren't feeling well and collapsed due to heat stroke seconds later resulting in myself having to drag them back to the front of the property to receive medical attention. The delay in getting another person attired in breathing apparatus to re attempt the internal fire attack resulted in the fire spreading from a single room to the entire second story.

Please don't read any anti-volunteer attitude into my viewpoint. I began as a volunteer and well know their worth to our State. I recognise our state could not afford or even wish to replace them with a non-volunteer model. I simply hope that this committee recognises that some highly populated urban areas with complex risks receives adequate fire protection from a service model that delivers a guaranteed response with appropriate equipment and personnel. I believe the proposed reform covers this and at the same time does not undermine the future CFA model in regards to its ability to provide protection to its gazetted area"

Much has been said about the potential loss of "surge capacity" if CFA loses its 35 integrated stations volunteers. I feel this has been highlighted by the representative body the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria. This group is resistant to a changed model of fire service delivery and wish to continue with the current model. The "Surge Capacity" they refer to is the CFA's ability to provide a large number of equipment and personnel to a major fire fighting campaign that would overwhelm local resources in less populated areas of Victoria. The proposed reforms do not deplete any bush fire resources and have openly stated there is no closure of brigades, volunteer members from those locations will still have a role as firefighters. This "surge capacity" thus far seems to be an immeasurable figure of volunteers that may or may not stay as members of the CFA should the Fire Service Reform go ahead. I have not heard of a single volunteer that proposes to discontinue their service from my Brigade nor mention from any other brigade. I suspect it's very few that would leave and that this alleged loss of "surge capacity" is being used as a desperate blocker to changing of the current fire service model. Under a new model the CFA may well improve greatly without the encumbrances of heavy urban areas and the work load placed upon it with the employment and management of a workforce of professional operational personnel required to address this challenge.

These are some but not all of the reasons I fully support the proposed Fire Service Reforms, I understand it must be difficult for the members in the Bill Select Committee to get a clear picture of what challenges Firefighters face and how the suggested reforms would improve service delivery to the people, assets and infrastructure covered in the proposed Fire Rescue Victoria area without any detriment to those remaining under the CFA umbrella.

I hope my submission has been helpful and I personally thank you for your interest on this matter regardless of your decision.

Please also feel free to contact me anytime for clarification on any part of my submission on:

[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

John Fryer.