

Submission to Fire Services Bill Select Committee

From: Andrew Howlett AFSM BJ (B.Sc(Ed), B.Ed)

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Select Committee. To give context to my submission, I am providing you with a snapshot of my background.

I have been a CFA volunteer since joining the Moe Fire Brigade in 1975 and have been with Rochester, Eaglehawk and now Maiden Gully Brigades as I have taken promotion in the State Education system. I was the inaugural Captain at Maiden Gully from when we formed the Brigade in 1998 until 2011. Maiden Gully is a growing western suburb of Bendigo and the Brigade works regularly and smoothly with the career staff of the Bendigo Fire Station. I am currently Brigade and Group Treasurer, a member of the Maiden Gully Management Team and a State accredited Level 3 Planning Officer for Incident Management Teams. I continue to be an active firefighter with qualifications as a Strike Team Leader and Sector Commander and attend about 40 calls annually as well as working in Incident Management. I have taken leadership roles in all long duration bushfires in Victoria from Ash Wednesday to the present time. In 1988, while on teacher exchange to Wisconsin, USA, I was privileged to spend a year as a volunteer with the Big Bend-Vernon Volunteer Fire Department. My employment history includes 35 years as a mathematics and science teacher finishing as an Assistant Principal in a large Bendigo Secondary College, over 3 years as Service Delivery Planning Coordinator for the CFA's Loddon Mallee Area and recent contract work as a Data Analyst for the Workforce Allocation Project and currently the Brigade Workforce Utilisation Project.

Submission

The lead up to the introduction of the Fire Services Bill has been a difficult time for both career and volunteer members of the Country Fire Authority. There have been a lot of political games played on both sides of Victoria's Parliament as well as Federally but it is clear that our fire services need significant change and have needed this change for some time. I see the Bill as an opportunity to provide a better fire service for all Victorians.

a. Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

The proposed change should have no negative impacts on fire service delivery. However, it will have significant advantages for the Victorian community through:

- Brigades such as ours continuing to do the same work as we do now with the same interaction with the career firefighters at Bendigo. With Bendigo becoming a Fire Rescue Victoria Station, I would expect that based on MFESB resourcing they will be better equipped and these resources will become available to our community.
- Removing the huge distraction from the leadership of CFA of managing career firefighters and dealing with Melbourne's population growth to the detriment of volunteers. This has resulted in insufficient time and resources being provided to give real leadership to brigades and to achieve cultural change. I am ashamed of many of my volunteer colleagues for the attacks that they have launched through social media on the Chief Officer and his team. I am left to wonder how disciplined our service actually is. Refocusing the CFA as a volunteer organisation should be the stimulus needed to encourage more inclusive and effective brigades.
- The current CFA/MFESB boundary is archaic and should have been altered decades ago but there has been no political will to do this. This boundary has resulted in inappropriate siting of fire stations and duplication of services. The Victorian Community just wants a fire truck quickly no matter how it is badged. Most know no difference and nor do they need to – it should be seamless delivery and the best we can provide.
- With all FRV Stations allowed to use extrication equipment at road accidents and not wait for a designated Road Rescue Vehicle to arrive, lives will be saved.
- The proposed FRV will have 82 fire stations creating more career options for paid firefighters and a greater ability to staff the more remote stations.

b. Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

I am optimistic that the proposed changes will increase volunteer engagement and participation through:

- Assisting to effect cultural change resulting in volunteer brigades with greater diversity and having members with a wider range of skills. This will encourage more people to volunteer with CFA. Unfortunately, I know of too many brigades where I could not encourage members of the community to join.
- Accepting that with change, some current CFA volunteers will walk away as will some career staff retire. This action will help drive cultural change. If the current situation continues more people will walk away as there is no vision for the future.
- Transitioning volunteers in the 35 CFA integrated brigades to the new model. This needs to be done with sensitivity and a commitment that one size does not fit all. One option for Bendigo volunteers would be to see them having their own tanker co-located with FRV appliances. This is exactly what they have been asking for over many years and will provide greater engagement and more response capability in the area. However, it needs to be accepted that in some cases, the volunteer component may not continue. There are several Integrated Brigades with large volunteer memberships but very few actual firefighters who are regular responders.
- As mentioned earlier, the refocusing of CFA to a volunteer only service must result in better brigades with more enthusiastic and committed members. All CFA Officers from the Chief Officer down to the Catchment Officers (the first contact with brigades) will be able to give stronger leadership and a greater level of support. CFA must accept that in some brigades that significant intervention will be required to improve service delivery.
- No longer will CFA District Duty Officers in Districts with Integrated Stations have to spend significant time with rostering issues and be able to put all their time to supporting their volunteer brigades.

As a volunteer in CFA's District 2, I have been fortunate to benefit from excellent leadership from our Operations Managers and Regional Managers over the last 15 years. There are few problems in our District. However, I am well aware of other Districts that have suffered from a lack of leadership allowing poor practices and poor cultures to develop. It amazes me in this whole debate that some of the most vocal critics come from areas where there are no career firefighters and unlikely to ever have them.

c. Short and long term cost impact on fire service provision

Short term:

- Some establishment costs for expanding the MFESB into Fire Rescue Victoria.
- Costs involved with co-location or other outcomes for volunteers at the 35 CFA integrated stations.

However, within twelve months, we should start to see a more cost effective fire service for Victoria through:

- Reduced overtime costs due to flexibility of larger staff numbers in the new FRV. For example: Currently when a CFA station with career staff (eg. Caroline Springs) cannot source a replacement member from CFA; they have to use a full MFB truck and crew at a cost of around \$14,000 for a 10-hour shift!
- In FRV Stations, moving away from the extravagant CFA Operations Officer in charge of one station to the MFESB model using Commanders will reduce costs.
- CFA's budget will no longer be impacted by significant overtime costs.
- CFA will not be spending significant amounts on industrial relations and legal costs.

In the longer term, there will be savings through:

- Rationalization of career stations in the Melbourne suburbs, particularly close to the current CFA/MFESB boundary.
- Greater standardization of buildings and vehicles
- The simpler organisational model for FRV with a Commissioner (like the Police) without a Chief Officer, CEO and Board.

Certainly as Melbourne and the major regional cities continue to grow, we will see more career staffed stations but that would happen under the current model.

d. Underlying policy rationale

- **Formation of Fire Rescue Victoria and establishing the Country Fire Authority as a volunteer only service:**
As outlined above, the current model of fire service delivery in Victoria is broken. Despite numerous reviews (the Government counts eight but there have been several internal reviews and 3 restructures over the same period), the CFA seems reluctant to or perhaps is incapable of change at all levels and provides inconsistent and often poor leadership to its Brigades. The Fire Services Bill can provide the stimulus for constructive change to the benefit of the Victorian Community. It will allow the CFA to focus on supporting its volunteers and making to necessary reforms that are long overdue.
- **Presumptive rights to cancer compensation:**
Representative groups from both career and volunteer firefighters have lobbied for this legislation for a number of years. The Legislation proposed by the Government is a good compromise and fair to all. The Committee should be aware that the CFA has a significant number of volunteers who have never fought a fire and as such the Bill cannot provide compensation just because you volunteer with the CFA.
- **Fire District Review Panel:**
This is a much-needed process. An independent panel should mean that decisions to further change the FRV/CFA boundary will be made based on data and be a transparent process. No longer will it be pressure from the UFU or be dependent on who is the current CFA Chief Officer. Periodic reviews are an excellent way to maintain a balance into the future. Had the existing CFA/MFESB boundary been reviewed periodically in the past many of the issues facing the CFA today would be non-existent.
- **Emergency Services Infrastructure Authority:**
This has the potential to produce positive outcomes. It will in time produce consistent designs for fire stations and other structures across Victoria. It seems strange that a CFA career firefighter should not work out of a station based on the same design criteria as a firefighter from the MFESB. A few years ago, CFA volunteer stations used different criteria to career ones – hence in our quite modern station, it is difficult to open the doors of trucks parked in adjacent bays! It has been my experience in managing Fire Station projects that CFA's Land & Building Services Section leaves a great deal to be desired especially in terms of quality control.

Finally

Over recent years, I have felt increasingly frustrated with the direction that the CFA has been heading and certainly by its lack of a real vision for the future. We generally do a great job in handling emergencies but in many ways we are living on the past successes. Coping with Melbourne's growth has generally blindsided the so-called **Country** Fire Authority to changes occurring in regional and rural Victoria and this is a major reason for the frustration that you are seeing come out over the past 18 months. I am convinced that the Fire Services Bill is the first step in building a better fire service for our State. The next and more critical step will be in its implementation. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input and I am happy to assist further if required.

Yours faithfully

Andrew Howlett

