

**FIRE SERVICES BILL SELECT COMMITTEE SUBMISSION**28<sup>th</sup> June 2017

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

**INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017**

My name is Geoff Dwyer and I have been a professional MFB Firefighter for 4 years currently holding the rank of QFF Qualified Firefighter. I am stationed at Deer Park FS43 in Melbourne's Western Suburbs.

Firstly I'd like to thank the select Committee members for allowing myself as a professional MFB Firefighter to make a contribution and I write to express my support for the proposed fire service reforms.

Deer Park regularly responds into CFA district 14 with both Integrated and 100% Volunteer stations. When responding into CFA districts we have encountered problems with fractured and differing communication systems, 2 different response systems, delayed responses and inconsistent skill sets creating an unnecessary danger. The current system does not acknowledge that these areas are now highly urbanised, densely populated regions with major hazard facilities and increased risk to both firefighters and the Community. This region includes Melbourne's major prison facilities, the Metropolitan Remand Centre, Port Phillip Prison and Dame Phillis Frost Women's prison. Furthermore major housing and industrial developments are already under construction and expanding rapidly from Wyndham Vale through to Tarneit, Rockbank and Plumpton.

Victoria's fire services boundaries have not changed significantly in 60 years.

- In 1950 when the CFA and MFB boundaries were last revised Melbourne's population was 1.3 million.
- Between 2015 and 2016 the figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed the population of Melbourne climbed 107,770 to 4.64 million, the fastest growth in the nation.

Under the current out-dated response system, 35 areas are wrongly zoned as 'country', despite being heavily urbanised and residential. Point Cook, Werribee, Hoppers Crossing, Caroline Springs, Frankston, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Craigieburn, Melton, Springvale, Boronia and Geelong are just some of the 35 'country areas'.

- Tarneit, 30km west of the CBD, is expected to grow by 53,000 residents by 2031, it will have a population of almost 75,000 by then, Rockbank is not far behind.
- Tarneit's new railway station was opened in June 2015 with a 1000-vehicle carpark and it has already reached capacity.
- Wollert in the Northwest outer suburban ring of Melbourne had 871 residents in 2011 but is forecast to reach 50,685 by 2031.
- In East Werribee an 'Australian Education City' has recently been proposed which would revolutionise Melbourne's West adding 80,000 residents and 50,000 students.

These areas need to be modernised as part of the reform of the fire service. As an MFB Firefighter it is reassuring to know that there is always another suitably resourced truck not far behind, in CFA regions this is not a standard operating procedure. It is inconceivable that there are urban CFA firefighters on the other side of an invisible boundary in metropolitan Melbourne who cannot be guaranteed this basic safety measure.

Many of the skills and qualities of firefighters are highly sought after by employers in other industries. This makes firefighters extremely employable meaning that the time needed to devote as a volunteer firefighter is often inhibited by full time work commitments. When the call volumes are low as in rural Victoria this is not so much an issue and can be managed by an employer. However in an urban environment with a large volume of calls an appropriate and timely response cannot be guaranteed, this fact is evident in call history data where 'failed to respond' and 'delayed' responses are common.

Additionally while many would argue volunteer and career firefighters are trained the same, that is simply not true and to argue otherwise is disingenuous. When a volunteer truck responds the qualifications of each firefighter is unknown and inconsistent, placing the community and firefighters already committed to an emergency in unnecessary danger.

This is the reality of a volunteer response in a high risk urban environment and it is unacceptable that this risk has not been adequately mitigated.

Under the reforms all high risk urban environments will receive a streamlined and highly structured initial response under one response system. A rapid 8 minute response, with 7 professional career Firefighters on two fire trucks is the minimum standard needed in highly urbanised areas. Furthermore there is absolutely nothing in these reforms that will stop volunteers responding to emergencies as they do now whether rural or urban.

One of my favourite parts of the fire service reforms is the introduction of an independent Fire District Review Panel which will remove the protectionist behaviour when it comes to boundary review. The panel will use actual Triple 000 data, projected population figures and urban development when determining the necessity for a professional response. High growth and high risk areas can be critically analysed by prioritising community safety rather than the emotions of turf wars that belong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

All Victorian, professional and volunteer Firefighters, deserve modern fire services that meet the needs of our growing communities. The proposed fire service reforms are vital for the safety of all Victorians including me as a Firefighter. The reforms will also address the ever increasing and unrealistic demand being placed on volunteer Firefighters because of the enormous urban growth resulting in increased emergency calls. A 'failed to respond' or a 'delayed' response is simply unacceptable in high risk urban environments. The current protectionist, obstructionist and turf war mentality shown by a vocal minority serves no purpose and is a blight on Victoria's emergency services, hindering any improvement in service delivery.

I could submit pages of documented evidence into the history and behaviour of certain politicians and stakeholders, the underhanded tactics, obstructionism and interference but I have decided not to. All I will say is that it has been nothing short of disgusting however at the same time enlightening to know the lengths and lows some will go to for either a vote or to protect turf. This behaviour must end, firefighters have had enough, the Victorian community has had enough, it is time to repair the damage done and focus our energy on the future.

Myself, my colleagues, my family and numerous other people that I have discussed this topic with have had enough of those opposing every change or announcement for Victoria's fire services. Victoria's emergency services must be free of ego, spite, undue media hysteria, hidden agendas and political interference, the community deserves better, the community deserves a modern fire service and a positive change from the current situation.

Thankfully I have heard that this select committee into the fire service reforms will be evidence based, the data and the facts will speak for themselves and the emotion must be put aside.

The fire service reforms are vital for the safety and future of a rapidly growing Victorian community, they are important to me, my family and my colleagues. The proposed Fire Service Reforms have mine and my family's full support.

Kind regards

MFB QFF Geoff Dwyer

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