

Prue Purdey

From: HOWELL, Francis [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 29 June 2017 4:07 PM
To: LCSC
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Submission to Select Committee Re: Inquiry into the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Dear Committee Members,

On Friday the 26th May I was travelling to Venus Bay in South Gippsland with my partner when I noticed a column of smoke rising at Bass on the Bass highway.

Arriving at a house well alight, I assisted with command and control until there was an incident controller on scene.

What I observed was the difficult role that volunteers are faced with in rural areas of our state.

Although the fire was directly across the highway from the town of Bass and therefore the fire station, a water tanker from Bass Brigade crewed by two volunteers, was the first firefighting appliance on scene, having arrived some 20 minutes after I did. This time lag dramatically highlighted the difficulties the volunteer model has with response times.

The fire fight was lost before Bass arrived, however, all attending crews performed to their best. Due to the volunteer status of a Brigade such as Bass, turnout and on scene arrival times will always be lengthy. The house was totally consumed, thankfully the occupants had evacuated safely despite some noticeable singeing of their hair. Lack of water supply also became an issue. As were the .22 calibre bullets discharging due to the fire, some penetrating the walls of the building within 2 metres of myself and a volunteer fire fighter.

After some 34yrs of firefighting, 28 of those spent as a station officer in the MFB, I have to say that what I experienced that day was cathartic to me as to the role of volunteers in Victoria and demonstrated to me the crucial need for a prompt response when required.

A week or so later, I arranged to meet with the Captain of San Remo Brigade, Mark Thielle, at San Remo fire station. Mark related that during week days San Remo brigade are struggling to have sufficient volunteers available to respond to fire calls.

The older members of San Remo Brigade feel that they cannot hang up their boots yet, as there are insufficient numbers of volunteers coming through to ease their burden. They do not want to leave their community in the lurch. It should be noted that during the summer school holidays, the population of San Remo increases from in the region of 2,000 to about 35,000 people.

This situation is not isolated to San Remo, the problem is documented in many other areas of the state, including heavily populated urban areas both in the suburbs of Melbourne and regional cities.

A prompt response to an alarm of fire in the real country (eg. Bass) is highly unlikely given the current volunteer model. The State of Victoria cannot have career fire fighters at every township.

What the State can do, is to ensure that firefighter safety and community safety is as good as is reasonably practicable in those areas of the State where increased population densities demand prompt career firefighter response.

To this end, ensuring that a **minimum of (7)** career fire fighters are on scene within **8 min** so as to limit the property damage and allow **safe systems of work** for them to be instituted, have a benefit for the whole of community, as this would allow fire fighters to be confident that fully trained fire fighters would be soon on scene promptly, to back each other up, should the unexpected occur.

The reformed fire service model would provide for a greater focus on recruiting volunteers in the areas where brigades are struggling to attract members by concentrating the efforts of the CFA on volunteers exclusively. The injection of government funds so as to modernise volunteer fire stations and equipment is also sorely needed.

By supporting the proposed legislation, you will ensure that those areas in the Victorian community, where population growth has not kept pace with the fire services, will be provided with adequate fire fighter coverage in the future.

Locations such as Geelong, Werribee, Hoppers Crossing, Lara, South Warrandyte, Frankston, Springvale, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Melton and Craigieburn etc. can no longer be considered country. These areas are, and have been, urban environments for decades.

Eight major reviews in to the Victorian Fire Services have been conducted in recent years, **ALL** provided recommendations regarding the modernising of our Fire services.

The legislation this committee is inquiring into provides the framework with which that modernisation can evolve.

Doing nothing is not an option, leadership *must* be demonstrated by our elected representatives ie. yourself and your colleagues. Continuing with the status quo will see the community continue to be provided with a model that is broken.

Our representatives in parliament *must* prioritise community safety and fire fighter safety above those loud and minority of voices advocating self-interest.

If community safety and fire fighter safety remain the focus of all parties then 'surge capacity' cannot and will not be affected.

As a career fire fighter I strongly support this legislation.

Thank you for your consideration.

Francis Michael Howell
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 Hazmat Department
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