

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

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

My name is Peter Thomas and I respectfully make this submission on my own undertaking and expressed as my opinion based on my experience and qualifications.

I am an Assistant Chief Fire Officer with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and have served 39 years as an operational firefighter.

My tertiary qualifications include:

- Graduate of Institute of Fire Engineers
- Associate Diploma Fire Technology
- Masters of Public Sector Management

I have received the following awards and commendations:

- National Medal
- Emergency Service Medal (2007 Victorian Bushfires)
- MFB Good Conduct and Long Service Medal
- Chief Officer Commendation

Since the inception of the current fire service model Melbourne has spread significantly in size geographically and density. Typically with urban spread, public services and infrastructure is progressively developed to meet community needs within the constraints of available resources. This is seen with the provision of roads, utilities, public transport, schools, medical facilities and emergency services. The fire services model has not changed since 1958 and I believe currently is not able to meet all of the challenges that comes with that change.

It is my view that the proposed new Fire Services Victoria will enhance community safety, increase safety to firefighters and in the long term provides a more cost effective fire service.

I base this view on the following:

Response Times

A critical strategy in fire suppression is weight of attack. This refers to the amount and type of resources that are applied within a specific timeframe. It is widely accepted that the control of fire, is most effectively achieved by early intervention

with sufficient resources before it has an opportunity to develop beyond the compartment/room of origin. In simple terms 'hit it hard and hit it fast'. This is a strategy that is employed by most modern fire services.

This is best achieved by the strategic location of suitably designed and equipped fire trucks (located in fire stations) which are crewed by firefighters that are immediately available to respond and quickly arrive on scene to implement firefighting activities.

Since I began as a firefighter in 1978 there has been fundamental changes in Melbourne's built environment. Melbourne's suburban boundary and population density has increased significantly. This has resulted in greater traffic congestion and increased demand on emergency services. Added to this, is a change to building contents, particularly residential buildings, which have increased fire loads due to the types of synthetic materials used in furnishings which have a higher level of flammability. This translates to faster fire development that increases the imperative for rapid deployment of resources.

The increased risk level requires a model of service delivery which has a coordinated approach that will be provided by a single fire service for urbanised areas. This early intervention allows firefighters to conduct internal firefighting which enables the best opportunity to rescue anyone that is inside and a higher prospect to minimise property damage by restricting the spread of fire. If the fire is allowed to grow to a point where it is unsafe to conduct internal firefighting then an external firefighting strategy must be utilised. Consequently, the opportunity to rescue anyone inside is significantly reduced and in most cases results in greater property damage.

In short, to provide a level of fire cover that delivers a reasonable outcome it is critical that appropriate fire fighting activities must occur as soon as possible. This is best achieved by a unified fire service that operates in a co-ordinated system under a unified command structure utilising standard operating procedures, compatible equipment and crews trained within an accredited training framework.

I don't believe that a volunteer model can consistently deliver the necessary response times in a large urban environment purely because of the volunteer's proximity in time and place to respond to emergencies.

Diverse Skill Base

Fire Services these days provide far more than fire fighting services. These include emergency response to Hazardous Material incidents, Urban Search and Rescue, High Angle Rescue, Emergency Medical Response, Swift Water Rescue, Road Accident Rescue and Confined Space Rescue, to name a few. These require specialised technical skills that involve specialised training. Teams can be deployed state-wide, interstate and potentially internationally. These services will be best served by a unified approach that deliver standardisation of equipment and training and a unified command structure providing consistent approach to the concept of operations.

Additionally, firefighters play a significant role in building legislation and providing critical input by investigating the performance of building design and fire safety systems post the occurrence. A crucial example is the recent Lacrosse Building fire where the issue of non-compliant cladding was identified and alerted to the relevant building authorities. Other activities include public education activities and pre-fire planning purposes.

All these provide a complex delivery of services that would be best served by a single agency to provide a single Concept of Operations.

Volunteers

Under the proposed model volunteers will still be able to provide the valuable service that they have always provided to the community. They will still be able to respond and work side by side with firefighters of the new fire service. FSV staff will also continue to assist and support the CFA with its service delivery.

I provide this submission in good faith and the purpose of supporting the proposal as I believe it will provide a better model for serving the community.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make a submission and I am willing to provide clarification if requested.



Sincerely

Peter Thomas

