

**VOLUNTEER AND COMMUNITY SUBMISSIONS TO UPPER HOUSE SELECT
COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO FIRE SERVICES RESTRUCTURE PROPOSAL**

From Volunteer Firefighter [REDACTED],

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Ferntree Gully, 3156. Mob. [REDACTED]

Submission supplied as an individual.

I request that this submission be 100% confidential.

3rd. July 2017

On June 14th, along with over 340 CFA volunteer firefighters, I attended an information session held at Monbulk Secondary College. The meeting was chaired by Emergency Services Commissioner Lapsley. The speakers were Chief Officer Warrington and Emergency Services Minister Merlino.

At the end of the meeting which lasted approx. 90 minutes, I was totally confused about the reorganization of the Victorian fire services.

The meeting was a “this is what is going to happen” meeting with no opportunity to consult with volunteer firefighters. Virtually all of those who attended felt as I did when I chatted after the meeting and on the way home.

ALP Minister Merlino kept saying that we were going to get a “modern” fire service, with pots of gold at the end of every rainbow and backing that would be unsurpassed in the world. **The problem is that there were NO DETAILS as to how this was going to be achieved.....just a huge number of UNANSWERED QUESTIONS,**

I am particularly concerned that the Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill 2017 has been combined with the fire services restructure legislation.

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The Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill 2017 should never have been combined with the restructuring proposal. This is a callous and despicable move to try to force Members of Parliament to pass the bill in both houses. For many years now, firefighters have been trying to get legislation passed to cover certain cancers commonly found in firefighters. When firefighters are very ill they should not have to prove that certain cancers are the result of their firefighting tasks .

At the above meeting, we were told that there would be a boundaries committee which would look at changing boundaries between volunteer CFA stations and Fire and Rescue Victoria boundaries. I am concerned that these boundaries will be changed at the will of the Government and the UFU. It has been very well understood for many years that the UFU want control of all outer Melbourne areas.

This matter has not been even partly explained to volunteer firefighters and it certainly must be before any legislation is passed in either House of Parliament.

The brigade that I serve in as an active structural and bushfire firefighter has four modern firefighting vehicles and very modern equipment We attend about 350 calls per year.....about one call each day. We provide a modern service and in my 35 years as a member, I cannot remember any complaints from the public about the service we provide....in fact the opposite is the case! We are very well supported in many ways by our community of Ferntree Gully.

According to the Melways Directory for Melbourne and surrounds, there are approximately 158 CFA brigades and 51 Metropolitan Fire Brigades. Page 3

The CFA brigades are usually situated only a few kilometres from each other. The Dandenong Ranges is a classic example. In the City of Knox in which Ferntree Gully is located, there are 8 CFA brigades, two of which are integrated (volunteer and staffed CFA brigades). In Ferntree Gully, we are closely surrounded by brigades such as Boronia, Scoresby, Upper Ferntree Gully, Upwey, Belgrave, Rowville, Sassafras - Ferny Creek, The Basin, Montrose and Bayswater. Should a brigade be unable to turn-out for some reason and it does happen, there are always closely surrounding brigades able to do so. We have a turn-out time of four minutes but the closeness of brigades to their communities means less travel time and an on-scene time close to any staffed brigade or MFB brigade. **The time delay debate is a myth!**

Within each geographic area are groups of brigades. In the City of Knox, we have the Knox Fire Brigades Group, consisting of Bayswater, Boronia, Montrose, The Basin, Scoresby, Rowville, Ferntree Gully and Upper Ferntree Gully. Compare this with the City of Whitehorse which has MFB brigades in Nunawading and Box Hill.

The Knox Fire Brigades Group, as with other nearby groups such as the Dandenong Ranges Group, support the Knox Group and vice versa. The individual brigades within the Knox Group specialize in specific equipment which is used to support many other brigades. For example, Ferntree Gully has a large capacity Quick Fill pump vehicle, Scoresby has an ultramodern hose layer which has frequently attended fires in the MFB area, Bayswater a breathing apparatus support vehicle which attends fires many kilometres from Bayswater, including the MFB area to refill and clean breathing apparatus on the spot in order to keep firefighters supplied with an emergency necessity. Montrose has a "flair-off" vehicle which attends emergencies involving LPG fuelled vehicle incidents. Rowville has emergency lighting capabilities. Brigades are multi-skilled and extremely capable to act in the time of an emergency.

Brigades such as Ferntree Gully train twice a week, which would be the norm for many brigades. Our program is cyclic, and constantly reviewed. Training is practical off-site or on-site, with theory sessions within our program. Training could be a hot fire session at the training ground at Carrum or a master class dealing with arson conducted by Vicpol, or indeed a session conducted by Ambulance Victoria aimed at refreshing how we can better assist them in time of need. We email all members our program of training three months in advance.

I do not believe that statistics would show that losses due to fire or explosion would be any greater in outer Melbourne CFA areas covered by volunteer brigade than those covered by MFB or CFA integrated brigades. Obviously for many reasons such as distances, water supply etc., losses would be greater in isolated or remote areas of Victoria. That is inevitable regardless of volunteer or paid firefighters.

Community Engagement and safety are vital tasks which brigades engage in on a very regular basis. At Ferntree Gully for instance, in the last year, we have arranged three innovative community bushfire meetings, worked with a local school to improve their emergency planning, engaged with schools, preschools and secondary students in Fire Safe Kids and Fire Safe Youth programs and attended many community events such as the Knox Festival, Carols by Candlelight, Father Christmas runs and welcomed the community at our annual open day held on the last Saturday in November. As recently as Friday June 23rd. we combined with the Eastern Regional Libraries Ferntree Gully Branch to hold our 6th "Funtime-Storytime at the fire station". This aims at pre-school children, their parents, grandparents and friends. The program involves a pantomime with messages about smoke alarms and a story acted out about leaving cooking on the stove when distracted. Captain Koala is present. The children become involved in craft and can try their hand squirting water from a real fire hose under supervision of a real volunteer firefighter. So far, over 1300 people have attended these programs over four years. They book out very quickly.

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Ferntree Gully CFA was a runner up in the RACV Victorian Fire Safety Awards in 2015. Our aim is to better educate our community so that we do not have to attend fires which should never have occurred.....eg those involving cooking not supervised and left on the stove, candles, recharging mobile phones etc. The results of house fires are often devastating to families and most should never have occurred.

There are many unanswered questions in this rushed reorganization of the fire services. I am not at all against change...change is a constantbut I am against a rushed and disorganized reorganization, WITHOUT CONSULTATION WITH “ON THE FIREGROUND FIREFIGHTERS” seemingly for no other reason than because that is the wish of the United Firefighters Union.

Future costs to Victorians will be huge. Changes to uniforms, vehicles, re-badging etc. will be enormous for no real reason.

Volunteer firefighters who are highly trained in all types of fires and situations including HAZMAT incidents and all types of structure and non-structure fires and incidents WILL NOT be satisfied to become simply “bushfire fodder”. They will leave the service in droves. At Ferntree Gully, we have over 800 years of experience in total membership wise. We have some of the very best firefighters in any service. We have amazing experience within our ranks. Other brigades tell similar stories.

There are two outstanding examples, amongst many, of volunteer firefighters from a large number of neighbouring brigades working together to effectively suppress major fires.

- **The bushfire example would be the Ferntree Gully bushfire on Black Saturday when the chips were really down.** A huge number of neighbouring volunteer brigades including the Boronia CFA integrated brigade worked for hours to control and pull-up a raging fire that began in the quarry area at about 1pm. Later that year I spoke at Bendigo with the Black Saturday Royal Commission's Jack Rush about that fire. He told me that he understood that had this fire not have been "pulled up" there would have been more deaths and loss of property than all of the other fires put together. I was unaware that he even knew of this fire.
- **The structure example would be a fire that occurred on Grand Final Day in 2015.** Our pagers went off just after the start of the game on a very hot and windy Saturday afternoon. As I drove to the station, I could see a black plume of smoke arising. The call came in as a mulch fire but this smoke was not from a mulch fire. The wind had taken it into two or three structures, one of which was a very long and wide shed containing mowers, tractors, wood working machines on three phase power, timber, props and a very large sawdust hopper. There was another long and wide building used for wood-working close by at right angles to this structure. Ferntree Gully CFA along with all volunteer firefighters from Upper Ferntree Gully, Upwey, Bayswater (breathing apparatus van) and Yellingbo (rehabilitation and refreshments support) worked tirelessly together. Vicpol (traffic and investigation) and Ambulance Victoria (medically checking firefighters as they completed breathing apparatus work within the building) supported the effort. **These brigades stopped the fire about one third along the shed on a very hot windy day. The firefight was internal as well as external and the result was one that all brigades could be proud of.**

At Ferntree Gully CFA, which this month, celebrates 75 years as a volunteer brigade serving our community, we have a phrase “FRAPP” which we constantly refer to:

Family.....our family and the CFA family to which we belong.

Respect.....for each other, ourselves, our community, Victoria, and the CFA.

Accountability.....to ourselves, our brigade, our community, to the people of Victoria and to the CFA

Professionalism.....always.....you don’t need to be paid to be professional.

Pride.... In ourselves, our brigade, our community, and the people of Victoria and the CFA.

These are really important to us and we took, as members, many hours to come up with what we thought were the best words to describe what we do and how we do it.

Can we, as Victorians and Australians (as our strike teams frequently go interstate, and even overseas) afford to lose all of this? This really worries me. Once the egg is scrambled (at the whim of the UFU), it will not and cannot be put back together again.

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3rd July 2017