

My name is Rob Stephenson. I have been an employee of the MFB since 1990. I am currently a Senior Station Officer at Oakleigh fire station and have carried out roles as an Acting Commander in various departments including Alarm Assessments and Equipment and Resource management.

***My submission is in support of the fire services reform bill.*** It will discuss and point out benefits to the fire services, government and the community of Victoria in relation to the committee's terms of reference.

As a fire-fighter in the 1990's I attended the bushfires in the Dandenong's. I was driving an MFB water tanker at the time. Upon arrival we were attached to a CFA taskforce and enlisted four volunteers to man our tanker to assist the two MFB career staff. For the rest of the day we worked as a team to protect as much property and life as we could. Unfortunately the skills, training, knowledge and uniform of the six fire-fighters on the truck was very different. The other CFA tankers in the taskforce as well as their equipment were also very different. Radio communications and language spoken as well as procedures and an inability to send the vehicles into the same terrain types meant a very disjointed effort. At the end of the day we had managed to work well together with our various strengths and weaknesses but we were very much hamstrung by inefficiencies due to old work practices. ***There were never any issues about career staff and volunteers or the respect we have for each other in carrying out our duties*** (despite what some media will report).

This Fire service reform bill will help with interoperability issues and ***improve fire service delivery across Victoria***. By having both the CFA and MFB fire-fighters merged into FRV this will improve ***common language, procedures, equipment and understanding of capability and capacity*** of each of the services. I am sure there will be many other benefits to our service delivery as well.

I have also over the years worked as an Acting Commander in the State Control Centre, Gippsland Regional Control Centre, Traralgon Incident Control Centre, Kilmore Divisional Command and at the Hazelwood mine fire. ***My roles have been varied*** between ***Liaison and operations activities*** including ***deputy operations and operations officer at the Hazelwood mine***. I am proud of what I do and love to help others but I am frustrated by politics, red tape and inefficiencies. I've had no real issues with volunteers or the CFA career staff and I never will. My role as an officer/fire-fighter is to protect life, property and the environment. I do this by applying my acquired skills and knowledge.

The difficulties we face are generally a misunderstanding of each other's capabilities, capacity, procedures, language and experience. These dynamic situations will always occur and we will always work through them. ***By merging the CFA and MFB into FRV the opportunity to learn from each other and understand each other will only have positive effects on volunteer's engagement and participation*** as well as positive outcomes on how the career staff work together. The volunteers are fantastic for surge capacity when they are required at large scale events but it is too much to ask of them to attend the myriad of calls such as false alarms, bin fires, tree fires, etc. In the event that career staff are not available, the volunteers will always be called upon to assist, but this impacts their workplaces and family time and of course means longer response times.

A merge will simplify fire service delivery down to FRV and CFA volunteers. It will enable both organisations to assist each other in the same way other states in Australia do. ***Clearer boundaries and better communication will ensure better fire service delivery*** to the state and once in place ***I believe the volunteers will see this reform as a good thing for all***.

In the short term I am sure there will be some costs involved such as rebadging of uniforms, equipment, stationary, etc. There will of course be **savings as well by removing duplication.**

I know there will be real **savings and increased income in the Alarm Assessment (AA) space** if FRV centralizes assessments for false alarm charging. Having spent approximately two years in the MFB's AA department as the Acting Commander/Manager and as the senior station officer under the previous manager I have firsthand knowledge of current MFB and CFA practices regarding false alarm charging.

The way the MFB has centralized AA has meant lower false alarms per Alarm Signalling Equipment (ASE) thus lower costs and less trucks on the road while at the same time increasing revenue. The current system of Alarm Assessment within the CFA is much less effective and appears to lack governance. The MFB's AA department should not be seen as a revenue raiser but much like speed/safety cameras the effect of false alarm charging is revenue for the fire service/government. Centralizing AA into FRV over the new boundaries will have **an immediate impact on FRV revenue through consistent application of false alarm charging.** Over the long term false alarm charging will have a larger impact as urban growth continues.

With regards to underlying policy rational or why the government should go ahead with the reform I say this. The reform bill puts in place a mechanism for a system of review of risks to communities' as urban sprawl and growth continues. A lack of significant boundary change for over 60 years has meant that **fire service delivery has not improved in built up areas.** It is not possible nor should we expect for volunteers to respond quickly and safely in built up areas. Distances of travel, interruption to their workplaces, traffic, etc. mean that **response times in built up areas are dangerously slow and an undue cost on local business/work places.**

In conclusion with over 25 years of fighting fires this reform is in my view well over due. Previous **recommendations, inquiries, commission hearings, etc. have been about fixing the mistakes of the past and improving community safety in the future. This bill will go a long way towards improving so many aspects of fire service delivery and will in my view help with volunteer engagement and participation by improving our understanding of each other's capacities and capabilities, while at the same time defining clear boundaries. The bill will also bring about some cost savings and increased efficiencies.**

I look forward to seeing the results of the select committee and place myself at your disposal should you wish to discuss my views.

Regards,

Robert Stephenson | Senior Station Officer

Oakleigh Fire Station | C Platoon Operations

Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board

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Please do not release my phone number or contact details to the public.