

## **Submission to Fire Services Bill Select Committee By The Westmere Fire Brigades Group – 7<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

### **Issues with the current Bill as a whole**

1. These two completely different aspects of legislation should not be combined into the one bill. Linking health issues to general reform is wrong, immoral and dirty politics.
2. There has been a complete lack of consultation. For meaningful reforms and any major restructure to progress ALL parties have to be involved like the volunteers representative body the VFBV.
3. Having 10 days or so to put submissions in is a sign of desperation and last minute reactionary politics.
4. Where are the budgets and costings? How can anyone make informed decisions without any financial details?
5. We strongly feel that this Parliamentary Enquiry does not constitute “consultation” in the process of major reform but is rather a desperate approach to find some middle ground and then try to launch it back into the Legislative Council again.

### **The 2 Parts of the Bill.**

#### **Presumptive rights Compensation.**

1. Within the Bill there are 2 pathways to compensation – one for the paid staff of Fire Rescue Victoria and another for the volunteers of the CFA. The bill must be structured in such a way that there is absolute parity between Fire Rescue Victoria and Volunteers of the CFA in regard to compensation. At present this does not appear to be the case and the Bill is therefore discriminatory.
2. Jack Rush QC says “ the mechanisms of claim for volunteers involve statutory hurdles not in place for career firefighters” and further “ for volunteers the Bill is capricious and unfair.”

#### **Fire Services Legislation Amendment [Reform] Bill.**

1. The volunteers in the 35 integrated stations will be side lined. There is no clear plan for their involvement in the future. How are they expected to share resources with a totally different organisation?  
What is the operational chain of command for those volunteers?

*Their role and status will be diminished, leading to low morale and a mass exodus of well trained volunteers. This will result in the lack of the surge capacity that is so highly prized by the CFA. It is unique in the world of emergency services and we cannot afford to lose it.*

2. The idea of secondment of staff back to the CFA from Fire Rescue Victoria is both duplicitous and ridiculous. Why alter the employment arrangements of so many good people. It unnecessarily complicates the Chain of Command and diminishes the role of the Chief Officer. Who do they really work for?
3. Mr Merlino talks about the 8 reviews all hinting that reform to the CFA is needed but Jack Rush QC says that any recommendation for restructure is “nonsense” and further he also says “the Royal Commission stated the integrated stations worked well and provide important surge capacity in times of need to rural areas”
4. There is no information on any financial details. What is the financial impact on this restructure? How are the levies distributed? There is an assurance from the Government that the levies will stay the same for another 2 years, but what then? How can they freeze the levies if they don’t know the financial implications?
5. There has been no consultation with the interested parties. This process started last year when the Premier and Mr Merlino tried to force the CFA Board to introduce the EBA. History tells us that the Board, the Chief Officer, and the former Minister – Jane Garrett were all sacked for not co-operating. Then the Premier and Mr Merlino were stymied by the Fair Work Commission. So when the fire danger period was over, The Premier and Mr Merlino have suddenly decided that the CFA needs reforming and saying “our firefighters are let down by outdated structures”  
But really we all know this whole process is all about getting the UFU their EBA.  
The reason there has been no consultation is because the whole process has been about setting up a structure for the EBA to go through and they didn’t want any interference in how that was developed.  
But the reality is that the structure of the CFA as we know it has stood the test of time. In fact the CFA has been tested many times in severe fires and mostly everything works well.
6. There are other areas where the volunteers could be impacted. How will the training programs be run? There could be unnecessary duplication of resources? The impact on staff of a career pathway?
7. There are no issues with effectiveness of the operations at the moment. Just changing a name on a truck door at the integrated stations is not going to make the community any safer. So why do it?

### **The Next Step/ the Future/ The Way Forward.**

- The Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill should be separated from the “Reform “ Bill.
- The Presumptive Rights Bill should be amended to take out the separation of career firefighters and volunteer firefighters.
- All firefighters should be eligible for compensation in the event of an illness impacting them. There should be a process to scrutinise all claims and establish the “bona fides” of all claims similar to Queensland and Tasmania.
- The “Reform “ section of Legislation is so flawed and full of complete unknowns [ financial details, impact on volunteers, staffing etc etc ] that it should be just rejected as it currently stands.
- A process of reform and updating should be undertaken but only with the complete co-operation and input from all the relevant parties involved, including the VFBV, the volunteer’s representative body.
- The CFA Board and Management should continue to employ career firefighters into areas of Melbourne and other parts of Victoria as needed by the natural increases in population.
- Any future reform package must ensure the CFA is fully funded.

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