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Secretary/ Treasurer

Ballarat City Fire Brigade



It should be noted that these are my personal views and not intended to be taken as representative of those of all Ballarat City Volunteers. Individuals have been encouraged to become informed and form their own opinions regarding the proposed legislation.

By way of background, I joined Ballarat City Fire Brigade in March 1998. It was at the brigade that I met my husband, a fellow volunteer who is the son of a now retired Leading Firefighter and Life Member of Ballarat City. My brother-in-law was once a Ballarat City volunteer and my mother-in-law was a member of the Ladies Auxiliary. Ballarat City is literally family for me and holds a special place in my life. It also leaves me in a difficult position regarding these reforms. I have held the positions of Brigade Chairman and Lieutenant each for 2 terms and moved to a non-operational role in 2012 after the birth of my first child taking on the duties of brigade Secretary/Treasurer to enable me to remain an active part of brigade management. I continue to hold that position and combine it with my duties as a stay at home mum to two very busy boys. My husband holds the position of 3<sup>rd</sup> Lieutenant.

The position of the Ballarat City Volunteers through any EBA negotiation has been that we support the right of our career staff to negotiate their work conditions however we aim to remove ourselves from being involved as far as practical. If individual members choose to actively support the staff they are not prevented from doing so however as a whole brigade we prefer to maintain a neutral position. We have remained fairly quiet during this round of EBA negotiations.

Ballarat City volunteers are affiliation fee paying members of the VFBV and also have made it very clear to them via our District 15 representative and other avenues that we feel the VFBV doesn't adequately represent or support volunteers at integrated stations and doesn't consider the impact on us when planning media campaigns. We feel their sudden surge of interest now in our welfare is too little too late.

There is such momentum behind these reforms that I believe we are past the point of no return and to have the legislation collapse would leave us with a chaotic and hostile environment. I understand and agree with the need to properly investigate and if necessary amend the legislation so aim to address the terms of reference. I can only speak of how this will impact the Volunteers at Ballarat City as I have no experience at a fully volunteered brigade.

### a. impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

From my understanding service delivery is a significant issue within the Greater Ballarat area. My belief was this was the rationale behind the Lucas Fire Station development which was in planning before the reform was announced.

I can't realistically foresee major membership loss at Ballarat City or across Brigades in the local area as a result of the reform although I do believe many are nervous as to how their operational capacity may be reduced in favour of an FRV response and what impact it will have on their access to equipment and infrastructure. These feelings may have been present under the integrated system anyway when Lucas came on line as greater numbers of staff will always mean a reduction in the necessity of volunteers operationally in an urban environment.

I am disappointed that the integrated model is no longer working and that so many have felt the need for the division of the services but if it's what is best for the people of Ballarat then I am supportive of the change. **As far as what will be the impact of this reform? Other than the ability to have the EBA passed, in Ballarat I don't believe much at all given Lucas was already due to operate from a temporary facility by the end of the year before the announcement was made. The Ballarat area was already heading for major change and upheaval no matter what. If anything the changes will free up Ballarat City Volunteers to participate more effectively operationally with greater autonomy.**

### b. effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

**Ballarat City Volunteers are currently not engaged and lack experience, skills and competencies. This is for many reasons and directly impacts our ability to provide any kind of fire service and grow our brigade. The staff meet fire service delivery for Ballarat City. This reform could address many of our issues and encourage our members to better participate.**

Due to the skills matrix treating the staff and volunteers as one brigade we are deemed to have the required skills and competencies to provide a fire service. These skills come from staff numbers even though the volunteer side of the brigade is lacking and means volunteers at Ballarat City are often prevented access to training courses. **The splitting of the services will address our skills shortage by opening up training opportunities for Ballarat City Volunteers and, as a natural consequence, operational opportunities and the ability to increase our numbers and improve member engagement.**

Ballarat City volunteers are not under any kind of illusion that we can do what the career staff do nor are we interested in trying to. We severely lack operational experience often due to circumstances that have been outside of our control and realise that into the future the majority of urban firefighting is likely to be performed by career firefighters in the Ballarat Area. We are looking to define our role in more specialist ways including expanding on our state leading Staging Area response and taking up more of an active firefighting role over summer, something we currently don't do. As an example of some of our barriers, Ballarat City's tanker has been off the strike team roster for many years. This was the decision of a previous officer in charge to address the service delivery issues of neighbouring brigades. As a result we have members who have been with the

brigade for 5+ years and have not operationally been on the back of a tanker or taken part in a strike team. We also have had an increase to 10 staff on shift so roles for our volunteers on urban fireground's have diminished to become more of a role of spectator, so much so that our members often don't even bother to turn out anymore. **The splitting of the services should address the issue of operational decision making to fix service delivery shortcomings elsewhere having such a large impact on Ballarat City Volunteers and should allow us to gain experience and greater autonomy to develop our future fireground roles. Effectively it has the ability to put us back on the fireground.**

The integrated model isn't working for us now and I can't see co-locating working for the long term. **Ballarat City Volunteers are in bad shape and this could be the catalyst to get us back on track – but only without the co-locating policy.** Whilst there is no open hostility at Ballarat City even an amicable separation is going to be awkward, confusing, give rise to tension, require some sort of sacrifice and build resentment. The arrangement heavily depends on FRV and CFA members being 100% committed to making it work, having a great FRV OIC, CFA Captain and CFA catchment officer who work well together driving it, and a supportive CFA Ops Manager overseeing to make sure it's working. Anything less will result in a breakdown of the relationship. Given the frequency of personnel changes there is a real and very serious risk of this happening. As an example of this frequent change Ballarat City was without a substantive OIC for 3 years as our then OIC acted up into other roles. The role was only permanently filled in January this year after he vacated his position. We had a constant rotation through the OIC's chair, some lasting a week, others up to three months at a time but the constant change lead to instability and a stagnating of the volunteer brigade. **We were unable to adequately enact change and grow due to circumstances outside of our control even though we had a constant and stable volunteer management team. This was far from satisfactory and is a major contributor the poor state the volunteers are now in operationally and the decline in our member numbers. A separation of the services would prevent this kind of disruptive scenario impacting us in the future and as a consequence would enable us to better participate and deliver a service .**

Currently we don't have a clearly defined segregated station. The station is, and for a long time has felt like a workplace not an equally shared fire station. Successive OIC's have initiated various policies such as volunteer's avoiding attending the station during meal breaks and not parking in the back yard of the station, renovations have occurred to the station with notification but not consultation and the one space that is meant to be defined as belonging to the volunteer's is not always used in a way that is respectful. In a station that was originally designed for 6-7 per shift plus volunteers we now have 10 per shift plus volunteers. Space at the station is tight. **For volunteers the environment is stifling and is inhibiting our ability to grow in numbers and acquire more equipment. Combined with our reduced operational role, it is the greatest barrier to our member retention and our ability to recruit. In the last 3 years we have lost an estimated 60% of our membership and of the 20+ new member enquiries I have had this year we have gained 2 members. We don't have the numbers to effectively participate and deliver a high standard of service. A splitting of the services would address some of these issues and increase Ballarat City Volunteer participation.**

The staff are frustrated with their workplace, we feel like we are being squeezed out and there is only so much that can be achieved by refurbishment given the land size and restrictions due to the close proximity of residents. There has also been discussion that when Lucas comes on line we will be poorly sighted for the staff to give the best possible coverage of Ballarat and that a move further north might be warranted. We don't feel we should have to move to address issues that affect the staff. My personal opinion is the best solution would be to separate us into different stations. This would be a long term solution that would remove barriers and ensure the staff could progress as required uninhibited and Ballarat City volunteers could expand and properly cement their place in CFA as an independent brigade. **Under the current model we struggle to participate and deliver a service. Allowing Ballarat City Volunteers to become an independent brigade would address this.**

This doesn't mean we can't continue to have a great relationship with our staff. I can still see Ballarat City Volunteers regularly participating in training and exercises with the staff and drawing on their skills and experience even if we "live separately". Sometimes the best way to mend and grow relationships is to give everyone a bit of breathing space and independence. Suddenly the air clears.

I am pleased to see money allocated for cultural and diversity change in CFA and FRV and that FRV and UFU will be asked to enter an accord to reset the culture and improve management and workforce relationships. **However, I believe money should be allocated to ensure a change in culture and relationships between CFA, Volunteers, VFBV, FRV and the UFU collectively or we will have engagement and participation issues and possibly hostility far reaching into the future.** Without large scale and significant culture change across the organisations a splitting of the services is only going part of the way to addressing the problems.

#### **c. short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision**

I expect this to be an extremely costly exercise both in the short and long term. It's not within my scope of abilities to accurately comment on this point.

#### **d. underlying policy rationale.**

Again this is not within the scope of my abilities to accurately comment however one might speculate it was to enable this and future EBA's to be negotiated and accepted without hindrance. No matter the reason/s we can't go back now, it's too late. Without the splitting of the services, if the status quo is to remain, it will be guaranteed that Ballarat City Volunteers will continue to fade away and eventually die. We need this.

I thank you in advance for your time.