

Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
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06JUL17

Dear Members of the Committee,

My name is Chris Wiseman and I have been a firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade since 2015. My main role within the organisation is to respond to an **'alarm of fire'** (which is defined as: "any call for assistance at a fire, accident, explosion or other emergency").

Some examples of this include: road accidents, emergency medical responses, house fires, grass/scrub fires, automated fire alarm/suppression system responses (in high rise buildings etc) and hazardous material incidents, to name a few.

Further to this as a part of my role within the fire brigade I am engaged in community programs through Fire Education in primary schools, fire hydrant inspections and other community awareness initiatives.

For the record I would have it noted that I would like this submission to remain confidential and not published.

I am writing today to express to you why I support the proposed fire services reform in Victoria. Although I do not live in rural Victoria or on the metropolitan fringe (currently reside in Altona North), I have seen in the past 12 years a population/urban density growth that seems unprecedented. Within a one block radius from my current residence, in the last 5 years, at least 20 single story, 3-4 bedroom houses have been demolished and replaced by 2 story, 3 bedroom townhouses. So we've gone from roughly 80 residents (estimate 4 per household) to 240, in a one block radius. This is a conservative estimate as well. What this growth does is create greater need for fire services response. As houses are boxed in more tightly, increases in population density create increases for accidents/incidents to happen in houses. With more exposures (other houses) close by, the risk rating increases also.

By having 24/7/365 manned fire stations in the population dense, urban environments, MFBs turnout times (<90seconds) and on-scene times (<7.7minutes) from the time of a fire call mean that around 90% of the time, MFB firefighters are able to contain the fire to the room of origin. This reduces the risk of fire damage, spread and potential harm to others that could be caused. All of this is conducted with a minimum of 7 firefighters on scene (which is the internationally accepted best practice to undertake safe fire fighting operations).

If this growth is happening in the inner western suburbs where there is already limited space, you can imagine what kind of urban sprawl and population growth/density will be like not only just outside the metropolitan boundary, but in regional areas of Victoria where large housing estates are popping up. In the West think Wyndham, Bacchus Marsh, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and surrounds.

The 'State of Victoria - Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2016' released a document titled "Victoria in Future: 2016 Population and household projections to 2051" which you can view here:

<https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/land-use-and-population-research/victoria-in-future-2016> which outlines population growth predictions for the state.

This is one key criteria, in my opinion, for fire services reform in Victoria.

Currently at Newport Fire Station we are responsible for the majority of major hazard facilities in the western suburbs. A timely response by specially trained, full time, professional, career firefighters is paramount to protecting the community if there was to be an incident at one of these sites (think refineries, hazardous material storage facilities).

As population sprawl and density increases on the metropolitan fringe and in rural Victoria, so will the infrastructure that surrounds them (or that already exists) and the potential risk to those communities.

A timely response by firefighters is paramount to community safety. An example on the metropolitan fringe where urban sprawl has boomed exponentially over the last few years happened just last week.

A house fire in Truganina (3.1km from the volunteer Truganina fire station) took Truganina 14 minutes from the time of the call to get on scene (3:53sec travel time). This figure is a 'good' one considering the call came through at 1952hrs in the evening when it would be safe to assume that most people who volunteer would be home from work. Had it have been during the day when those volunteers are at work, the risk to the community is a lot greater.

Point Cook and Hoppers Crossing career firefighters were responded (7.7km and 7.8km from station respectively) and arrived in 12 and 15 minutes respectively (8:30sec and 10:30sec travel time).

You can see from these times that it is largely over the ideal on-scene times that are reached by the MFB (average 7.7 minutes on scene).

The result of this is an extensively damaged house that would possibly have had a better chance of the fire being contained to the room of origin had fire service reform kept up with urban sprawl and not be subject to boundaries that were set over 50 years ago.

I want to stress that this is not an attempt to denigrate volunteer firefighters. It's the system that is failing the community and Fire Service Reform should aid in bridging this gap.

Truganina CFA states on their webpage (<http://www.truganinafb.org.au/index.php/about-us>) that they were formed back in 1940. A credit to the local community they have served, however we could all accurately speculate, 77 years ago the housing density and population of Truganina wasn't anything like it is today.

As I stated previously, if a call had have been during the day where the majority of people on the metropolitan fringe have to travel large distances from home to get to work, the result is a delayed response as career firefighters have to travel from greater distances, leaving the communities they protect potentially at risk because their services are being utilised elsewhere.

Obviously it is not economically viable for every volunteer brigade that exists in what is now an urban dense area to become career manned, however, fire services reform in Victoria needs to be looked at to tackle these issues where urban sprawl and the need for timely response from emergency service professionals is required.

Further to this I am a father to a young family. I am still hoping to one day own my own home. With Melbourne's economic climate re: housing affordability, places where I can afford to buy unfortunately for me, fall outside the metropolitan fire brigade boundary, in areas which are serviced by volunteer brigades. Knowing what I know from being an insider in this emergency service, I will not in good faith put the life of my family at risk, by moving to one of these areas in their current state.

In my opinion the government needs to set a standard that decrees if an area has a population density of 'X-per capita' within a 'Y-km' radius of the LPO, there should be full time emergency services in this area. Something like this I'm sure would be looked at if fire services reform was enacted in Victoria.

Another reason I support fire service reform, as has been proposed, is for the mental health and wellbeing of myself, my co-workers and all our families.

Upon becoming employed with the MFB, I was unsure what my wage was going to be. The EBA that expired in 2014 was already nine months 'overdue' to be signed off on. I was going off a document that was formed over five years earlier. Honestly, this created an amount of stress not only on myself and my recruit mates, some who had taken substantial pay cuts to join the job, but our families as well. I must stress, I nor anyone I have met joined this job for the money. It has and will always continue to be about what is best for the community, but we must all earn a wage, pay bills and provide for our families.

Being the case that I joined the MFB with an EBA expired, it is all I have known during my career so far. I joined in dispute. At the moment this feels like a legacy that in 10, 20, 30 years time I will be telling the junior firefighters my 'tales of old' "When I joined up, the EBA hadn't been signed for over 1000 days" I'll tell them. Some of my shift mates have amusing stories about how they got in the job in the 80s, it was indeed a different time back then, and we laugh about it. The current climate is no laughing matter. What I (along with over 300 other new recruits) have been through to date is disheartening. It is not the conducive environment I had thought it would be. It's certainly not the glamorous start to a career, one I had worked so hard to obtain for nearly a decade, that I had hoped for. I have heard stories from senior firefighters who have suffered through numerous EBA disputes over the decades, and it appears to be wearing thin.

Growing up with a family history in emergency services, it was always to me something that was revered. However slanderous media who have published arguably more front page articles than the worst atrocity that has happened in this state that you can think of, has altered this sentiment with the public.

It is a constant barrage that brings down moral within the station. Some firefighters who have paid for their yearly subscription, still bring that paper in on the day shift and it's the first thing we read about and it sticks with you all day. Labelled as 'political footballs', collectively the air is getting let out of the ball, and we are keen to see the negative reporting end and fire services reform make the real changes that the community and the state needs to end the dispute and move forward into the 21st century.

The median serving time of firefighters currently in my station, on my shift is 23.25 years over six firefighters. Four of those have served for over 27 years. I would hate to think that towards the end of their careers, and some may well serve for another 5-10 years still, that the current climate is what they remember about their careers most. Nor do I wish for this to be the norm and for something like this current political climate to plague my career for the next 30 years.

In summation, I believe fire services reform is required in Victoria due to out-dated boundaries, urban sprawl/population growth, demands on volunteers as well as the mental health and wellbeing of all firefighters.

I thank you for your time and consideration and trust that all points will be considered.

Respectfully,

Chris Wiseman