

Chris Corr

6 July 2017

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

RE: Fire Services Restructure

Dear Select Committee

I write to you to inform you that as both a passionate Victorian and a long-term volunteer member (of 25 years) of the CFA, working alongside many volunteers and also paid firefighters from integrated stations, that I do not support the Government's proposed fire services restructure in its current form nor the abysmal process from which it has been constructed.

The fire services restructure proposed by the Government has been developed without critical consultation of volunteers and their representative body Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria as is a requirement under the CFA Act. It is inconceivable for such a hugely important issue to both the safety of Victorians and to the tens of thousands of CFA volunteers and their communities, that change by way of a complete restructure would be proposed without extensive, careful, considered consultation and engagement over an extended period. There was NO consultation or information gathering from general CFA volunteers regarding the proposed restructure prior to or since its announcement.

Furthermore the Legislation documentation contains little or no detail about the operational impacts that the reform will have on volunteers, at outer Melbourne metro and regional centres both at, and critically importantly, near integrated stations, and ultimately the negative impacts on the safety of the community. There has not been the time available, nor any attempt made by the Government, to properly explore impacts including with those closest to the coal-face (e.g. the volunteer firefighters and Brigade members).

I state clearly that I am not opposed to change where change is due – even when change may be difficult. I volunteer much of my time for different causes and organisations in Central Victoria campaigning for beneficial change for the community, working with local Government and Government agencies to enact that change. Bringing the community along with and for the change is a critically important process. I am well aware of appropriate change processes and there has been a complete disregard for proper, fair or informing process in relation to the proposed restructure.

The reforms very clearly place at severe risk the future volunteer surge capacity for the summer fire seasons (and floods) and will in my belief (and that of many others) destroy the integrated model of CFA volunteer and career members working as one. For ten years I have been involved as a volunteer in fire fighting operations very successfully and collaboratively alongside paid firefighters under the current model which has provided good flexibility and adaptability. Whilst improvements can likely always be made there is no operational reason justifying a complete restructure in any form.

The Government has repeatedly said that these changes only affect the 34 integrated CFA fire stations which could not be further from the truth. The restructure will without a doubt affect at minimum all of the neighbouring and nearby stations. The Government's statements that "no volunteers will be forced to leave" and "no Brigades will be forced to close" and similar offer no comfort. Whilst thousands of volunteers are unlikely to suddenly quit CFA if a restructure is enacted (although many will) what will happen over a period of years, a decade and then beyond is that the roles and feeling of "community ownership" will be lost from volunteer Brigades in urban and semi-urban areas due to boundary changes, practices, procedures, attitudes and the like that will come out of FRV and the Union and volunteers will feel they are no longer valued or appreciated and many will leave. These will be highly experienced and qualified fire fighters and these many thousands of volunteers lost will massively reduce the surge capacity available from across CFA and it will not be there at the times it is most needed to protect the lives and property of Victorians and visitors to our State. This State could not come close to being able afford the financial cost of providing sufficient paid firefighters to cover surge or even general elevated fire and emergency operations tempo.

It should also be very clearly understood that the rapid "roadshow" that followed in the week or two after the announcement in no way constitutes consultation. It was after the legislation was already drafted and only a few weeks before it went to Parliament. At best it was a poor attempt at informing at the most basic of levels.

I recently attended a briefing session in Bendigo with the Minister and the Chief Officer of the CFA. Those in attendance were left with little to no confidence that the proposed restructure was going to be good for CFA volunteers nor the community and it was clear from the responses that the critically important detail simply does not exist. With something as complex as fire services the detail is critical as "the devil is in the detail". This has been seen through the period of negotiations between the UFU and the CFA attempting to pass the Unions EBA where many clauses were found to have unacceptable impacts on volunteers, or the ability of CFA to deploy its resources efficiently and flexibly. In many cases at that time, the Union and later the Government would publically indicate that "she'll be right" and "that's not what the clauses meant" etc. When the CFA and then VFBV suggested very minor changes that would have made clear the situation and would have been acceptable to volunteers the Union would refuse to amend the clauses giving a clear signal as to their intent of such clauses and their ability to use them to their advantage and the disadvantage of volunteers. In something as complex and with the recent history of mistrust, the detail must be worked out and must be clear before any restructure is supported and any Legislation is passed.

Unfortunately there is little to no residual trust remaining with most CFA volunteers for this Government nor the United Firefighters Union. At our recent briefing it was again reinforced that what the Premier and Minister have been publically saying is not even close to representative of many of the facts contained within the draft Legislation. This has been a major ongoing issue of the past 12+ months and was very clearly publically articulated by Jack Rush QC recently. There is no trust that the Government or UFU would negotiate detail fairly for the volunteers or Community benefit and they have shown that they cannot be trusted on this issue. Similarly the Select Committee should not in my view trust Government undertakings that cannot be plainly seen in black and white now.

The proposition tendered regularly in public by the Premier and the Minister that a restructure of the fire services were recommended in a number of the last eight reviews involving fire services is completely false. Again at our recent meeting the Minister started with the recommendations from the Bushfires Royal Commission as a justification for the restructure. This is completely false and in fact the recommendations from the Royal Commission included that the integrated model of CFA was critically important on Black Saturday and the model should be strengthened.

The proposed reforms are clearly designed as a fix for a political issue between the Premier and the Union and is in no way designed to bring about positive change to Victorian fire services. Only a full and open review with wide ranging genuine consultation can lead to positive change. Whilst there is actually little wrong with the current model I would be happy to support a full and open review with comprehensive consultation with all parties and this would have to be conducted over a period of some 12 to 24 months.

Furthermore the combining of the Presumptive (cancer) Legislation into the one piece of Legislation is completely disrespectful, not related and has no place in the fire services restructure issue. Furthermore it has been clearly shown, yet again, that volunteers and paid staff are not being treated equally within the draft Legislation despite the public statements from the Premier and Minister to the contrary. At absolute minimum the Bills should be separated and the issues addressed independently of each other.

May I make very clear that this is not about money and we would not be satisfied with a promise of more money (upfront or ongoing) in return for passage of this Bill. In the scheme of the costs of running our fire services and the costs of new fire stations and equipment, the \$100 million “sweetener” is minor in nature and will be almost entirely consumed separating CFA volunteer stations from FRV where there are currently integrated arrangements. We do not want to see the great harm come into being that will be caused as a result of this proposed ill-considered and miss-intentioned restructure – no amount of money is worth destroying CFA over.

We yet again see in the media today, excessive and inappropriate behavior from the Premier and his Minister with the head of the Department of Premier and Cabinet making all endeavours to get submissions made to this Select Committee by career (paid) firefighters. A Government serious about the safety of Victorians and serious about the role and well being of tens of thousands of volunteers who hold this State together would not be doing everything in its power to get its political result without listening and actually consulting and they would not be stacking a Select Committee with submissions supporting one position.

I ask that in the very best interests of the safety of the Community, the CFA and the volunteers that you do not support the proposed fire services restructure Legislation going before the Parliament until the many genuine concerns can be addressed by a full and open public review conducted over an extended period. There is absolutely no case to rush a restructure through before the coming fire season and risk the inevitable degradation of the quality and effectiveness of our current integrated fire services model thus putting the safety of the public at risk.

I would be very happy to discuss this matter with you further should you wish.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted name]

[Redacted contact information]