

30/06/2017

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

RE: INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

I am a Qualified Firefighter employed by the Country Fire Authority (CFA). I have been a professional firefighter for almost four years and I am currently stationed at Corio Fire Station in Geelong. Furthermore, I was also a volunteer firefighter with the Upwey Fire Brigade (CFA) from 2006 - 2016.

I am qualified as a hazmat technician (providing specialised hazardous materials and atmospheric monitoring around the state); aerial appliance (Teleboom) operator; breathing apparatus support (servicing breathing apparatus at incidents) vehicle operator, and; a Juvenile Fire Awareness and Intervention Practitioner.

I have chosen to write this submission in support of the proposed reforms of the Victorian fire services, as I believe that these reforms will provide a more effective and efficient means for firefighters to respond to fires, not only within urbanised areas, but all areas of Victoria. More importantly, I believe that these changes will result in a better service to the Victorian public

At the time of the CFA act being enacted by the Victorian parliament (1958), Geelong's population was approximately 90 000. It is currently 240 000 (2017) and is the second largest city in Victoria. Its population is forecast to reach 320 000 by 2036.

Presently there are three integrated brigades (Corio, Geelong City & Belmont) servicing the City of Geelong, and additionally, Ocean Grove within the greater Geelong area. These brigades workload has nearly doubled in the past ten years; from 2796 responses in 2006 to 4971 responses in 2016.

Corio fire station also has the highest number of actual fires within their primary response area in Victoria.

It is acutely evident that the City of Geelong is now a highly urbanised area, and its fire risk is vastly different from 1958. The antiquated legislation that dictates its fire coverage and response is no longer commensurate with the demands being placed on it, and is in desperate need of reform.

The creation of Fire Rescue Victoria to provide fire response within the City of Geelong will ensure that there will be a guaranteed response of two fire appliances and a minimum of seven appropriately qualified (skill mix) firefighters dispatched to every fire call; and arrive on scene within eight minutes. What this will ultimately mean is that the community of Geelong is better protected, and provided with a higher level of service, as there is a guaranteed response to every single emergency call.

On a personal level, what this means for me is that when responding to fires, I know that the minimum number of firefighters required on the fire ground to ensure that we can safely commence fire fighting operations will be there. Currently, when I respond with volunteer brigades, this is not the case. Due to the increasing workload and higher number of emergency calls, as well as changes in community demographics, working away from home, and everyday life, through no fault of their own, volunteers cannot guarantee that they are able to respond. In Geelong, volunteer brigades have, and do regularly fail to respond to incidents. This is in no way any indication of the dedication which they have to serving their communities, but the reality of relying on a volunteer based response model for an extremely large city.

Due to our response to incidents been based upon volunteer support, which is not guaranteed for every call, integrated stations are understaffed for the job that they must perform. For example, while working nightshift on the 29th August, 2017 at 2011hrs, A-platoon, Corio was responded to a grain dust fire, at Grain Corp in North Geelong. This fire was a protracted incident, running for almost 40 hours. Consequently, my platoon was deployed to this fire, again, the following night shift.

Despite being committed at this incident, myself and a Station Officer, who were crewing the Corio Teleboom, had to also maintain coverage for the Corio Fire District. This was due to the fact that there was no one else to do so. Consequently over this fourteen hour shift,

we were not only actively involved at the fire at Grain Corp, but on several occasions had to leave this fire to respond to other fire calls, not only within Corio, but also to support neighbouring volunteer brigades. That night we responded to incidents as far away as Anakie; where we were first on scene at a car fire. Not only were myself and Station Officer responding on Corio Teleboom put at risk, as we were required to respond to incidents as a crew of only two, it also meant that the other members of our shift had to also cover our roles at the Grain Corp fire while we responded, in addition to their own roles. Probably most importantly, the residents of Corio and surrounding areas were being put at risk, without their knowledge, as the only fire protection available to them was a single fire appliance with a crew of two.

Another example occurred on May, 2017 when Corio was called to assist with a fire at a Mosque in Manifold Heights, Geelong. As a result of this, a Leading Firefighter and myself were the only firefighters left within Corio's fire district. Furthermore, the appliance that we were crewing was a hazardous materials response vehicle, which has zero fire fighting capability. To cover for this, Lara pumper (volunteer) was stepped up to Corio Fire Station to help cover the gap. However, on arrival Lara Pumper only had one volunteer who was structurally qualified, and three firefighters that were wildfire qualified. What this meant was that only one firefighter on Lara Pumper was suitably qualified for the type of incidents that Corio would be responded to (namely structure fires, both residential and industrial). Fortunately, we did not receive any further fire calls until the time that Corio appliances were released from the Mosque fire. This would not have been a sufficient number if we had had to respond to another fire while Lara was stepped up to Corio.

While I have given two examples of incidents where the current CFA integrated model is not meeting the demands of a large urbanised area, such as the City of Geelong, these are an almost daily occurrence, and happening throughout the growing urban areas of Melbourne, and large regional cities.

The creation of Fire Rescue Victoria to provide fire coverage to these areas, while maintaining all CFA stations is the most logical solution to this growing problem within Victoria. Not only does it provide for the creation of a volunteer only CFA, with greater

autonomy and funding to continue their fantastic work, but also ensures that the community of Victoria receives the highest standard of fire protection and safety, in growing and highly populous areas, where volunteer response is being outgrown by demand. These reforms also ensure my safety when responding to incidents, as it is guaranteed that a second appliance with the appropriately qualified personnel are also responding, and will be able to affect my, or any other firefighter's rescue, should it ever be required.

I thank you for taking the time to consider my submission, and look forward to your consideration of reforming Victoria's fire services, to a more resilient, flexible and capable service.

Yours sincerely,

James Butler

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