

Local Council Representation Review

Preliminary
Report



**SOUTHERN GRAMPIANS
SHIRE COUNCIL**
March 2019

© State of Victoria (Victorian Electoral Commission)
20 March 2019

Version 1



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Executive summary

The *Local Government Act 1989* (the Act) requires the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to conduct an electoral representation review of each local council in Victoria at least before every third council general election.

The purpose of a representation review is to recommend an electoral structure that provides fair and equitable representation for the persons who are entitled to vote at a general election of the council. The matters considered by a review are:

- the number of councillors
- the electoral structure of the council (whether the council should be unsubdivided or divided into wards and, if subdivided, the details of the wards).

The VEC conducts all reviews based on three main principles:

1. taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors
2. if subdivided, ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council
3. ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

2019 electoral representation review

The 2019 representation review for Southern Grampians Shire Council commenced on Wednesday 23 January 2019.

Current electoral structure

Southern Grampians Shire Council currently comprises seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure. The electoral structure was last reviewed in 2007, which made a 'no change' recommendation.

Visit the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au to access a copy of the 2007 review final report.

Preliminary submissions

At the close of preliminary submission at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 20 February 2019, the VEC had received two submissions for the representation review of Southern Grampians Shire Council. These submissions can be viewed from the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au and a list of those people or organisations who made a submission is available at Appendix 2.

VEC options

The following options are being considered by the VEC:

- Option A (preferred option)
Southern Grampians Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure.
- Option B (alternative option)
Southern Grampians Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from one four-councillor ward and three single-councillor wards.

Background

Legislative basis

The Act requires the VEC to conduct a representation review of each local council in Victoria before every third general council election, or earlier if gazetted by the Minister for Local Government.

The Act specifies that the purpose of a representation review is to recommend the number of councillors and the electoral structure that provides ‘fair and equitable representation for the persons who are entitled to vote at a general election of the Council.’¹

The Act requires the VEC to consider:

- the number of councillors in a local council
- whether a local council should be unsubdivided or subdivided.

If a local council should be subdivided, the VEC must ensure that the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council.¹ On this basis, the review must consider the:

- number of wards
- ward boundaries
- number of councillors that should be elected for each ward.

Public engagement

Public information program

The VEC conducts a public information program to inform the community of the representation review, including:

- public notices printed in local and state-wide papers
- a public information session to outline the review process and respond to questions from the community
- a media release announcing the commencement of the review
- coverage through the local council’s media
- advertising on the VEC’s social media
- contact with community groups and networks

¹ Section 219D of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

- ongoing information updates and publication of submissions on the VEC website
- a submission guide to explain the review process and provide background information on the scope of the review.

Public consultation

Public input is accepted by the VEC in:

- preliminary submissions at the start of the review
- response submissions to the preliminary report
- a public hearing that provides an opportunity for people who have made a response submission to expand on this submission.

Public submissions are an important part of the process but are not the only consideration during a review. The VEC ensures its recommendations are in compliance with the Act and are formed through careful consideration of public submissions, independent research, and analysis of all relevant factors.

The VEC's principles

Three main principles underlie all the VEC's work on representation reviews:

1. Taking a consistent, State-wide approach to the total number of councillors.

The VEC is guided by its comparisons of local councils of a similar size and category to the council under review. The VEC also considers any special circumstances that may warrant the local council having more or fewer councillors than similar local councils.

2. If subdivided, ensuring the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council.

This is the principle of 'one vote, one value', which is enshrined in the Act. This means that every person's vote counts equally.

3. Ensuring communities of interest are as fairly represented as possible.

Each local council contains a number of communities of interest. Where practicable, the electoral structure should be designed to ensure they are fairly represented, and that geographic communities of interest are not split by ward boundaries. This allows elected councillors to be more effective representatives of the people and interests in their particular local council or ward.

Developing recommendations

The VEC bases its recommendations for particular electoral structures on the following information:

- internal research specifically relating to the local council under review, including the Australian Bureau of Statistics and .id data²; voter statistics from the Victorian electoral roll; and other State and local government data sets
- the VEC's experience conducting previous electoral representation reviews of local councils and similar reviews for State elections
- the VEC's expertise in mapping, demography and local government
- careful consideration of all input from the public in written submissions received during the review
- advice from consultants with extensive experience in local government.

Deciding on the number of councillors

The Act allows for a local council to have between 5 and 12 councillors but does not specify how to decide the appropriate number.³ In considering the number of councillors for a local council, the VEC is guided by the Victorian Parliament's intention for fairness and equity in the local representation of voters under the Act.

The starting point in deciding the number of councillors appropriate for a local council is comparing the council under review to other local councils of a similar type and size. Generally, those local councils that have a larger number of voters will have a higher number of councillors. Often large populations are more likely to be diverse, both in the nature and number of their communities of interest and the issues of representation.

However, the VEC also considers the particular circumstances of each local council which could be cause for more or less councillors, such as:

- the nature and complexity of services provided by the Council
- geographic size and topography
- population growth or decline
- the social diversity of the local council.

² .id is a consulting company specialising in population and demographic analysis and prediction information products in most jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand.

³ Section 5B(1) of the *Local Government Act 1989*.

Deciding the electoral structure

The Act allows for a local council ward structure to be unsubdivided—with all councillors elected ‘at-large’ by all voters—or subdivided into a number of wards.

If the local council is to be subdivided into wards, there are three options available:

1. single-councillor wards
2. multi-councillor wards or
3. a combination of single-councillor and multi-councillor wards.

A subdivided electoral structure must involve internal ward boundaries that provide for a fair and equitable division of the local council.

The Act allows for wards with different numbers of councillors, as long as the number of voters represented by each councillor is within plus-or-minus 10 per cent of the average number of voters per councillor for that local council (Principle 2). For example, a local council may have one three-councillor ward with 15,000 voters and two single-councillor wards each with 5,000 voters. In this case, the average number of voters per councillor would be 5,000.

Over time, population changes can lead to some wards in subdivided local councils having larger or smaller numbers of voters. As part of the review, the VEC corrects any imbalances and takes into account likely population changes to ensure ward boundaries provide equitable representation for as long as possible.

In considering which electoral structure is most appropriate, the VEC considers the following matters:

- the VEC’s recommendation at the previous representation review and the reasons for that recommendation
- the longevity of the structure, with the aim of keeping voter numbers per councillor within the 10 per cent tolerance for as long as possible (Principle 2)
- communities of interest, consisting of people who share a range of common concerns, such as geographic, economic or cultural associations (Principle 3)
- the number of candidates in previous elections, as outcomes from previous elections indicate that large numbers of candidates can lead to an increase in the number of informal (invalid) votes
- geographic factors, such as size and topography
- clear ward boundaries.

Public submissions (preliminary)

The VEC received two preliminary submissions by the deadline for submissions at 5.00 pm on Wednesday 20 February 2019. These submissions can be viewed on the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au and a list of those people or organisations that made a submission is available at Appendix 2.

In his submission, John T. Stone supported the current number of councillors in Southern Grampians Shire. Regarding the electoral structure, Mr Stone recommended changing to two wards, in which the main town of Hamilton would be represented by a four-councillor ward and 'the balance of the Shire, and the small towns', would elect three councillors.

The Proportional Representation Society of Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc. (PRSA) argued that Southern Grampians Shire should retain an uneven number of councillors, elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure.

Number of councillors

In his submission, Mr Stone wrote that seven councillors was an appropriate number of councillors for Southern Grampians Shire Council given the adjacent local councils of Glenelg Shire Council and Moyne Shire Council also each have seven councillors. Citing the limited population growth within the Shire, Mr Stone stated there was 'no reason to change' the number of councillors in Southern Grampians Shire Council.

In its submission, the PRSA argued that Southern Grampians Shire should retain an uneven number of councillors at seven, and alternatively supported a reduction to five councillors if the community deemed the smaller number acceptable. An uneven number of councillors would enable electors to continue to benefit from the proportional representation system, which the PRSA considered to be the fairest possible electoral system.

Electoral structure

In his submission, Mr Stone wrote that the current unsubdivided electoral structure had contributed to 'some progress', following the representation review in 2007. Mr Stone identified positive changes in local representation, such as greater diversity in councillors and a changing executive. Mr Stone wrote that the current unsubdivided electoral structure had 'probably fulfilled its potential vis-à-vis communities of interest being clearly represented'. He suggested that the Shire change to a multi-ward electoral structure 'as a constructive vehicle to widen the input of all the various parties' in the community. Mr Stone proposed a model comprising a four-councillor ward encompassing Hamilton and a three-councillor ward for the rest of the Shire.

The PRSA's submission focused on the merits of the proportional representation system, which, it argues, would be most beneficial in an unsubdivided electoral structure. In an unsubdivided

electoral structure with an odd number of councillors, the PRSA stated that proportional representation would apply 'in a symmetrical even-handed manner' to ensure that most of the councillors have been elected by the affirmative votes 'of an absolute majority of voters' over the entire local council area.

According to the PRSA, the proportional representation system was the fairest system because it maximised the number of effective votes. The PRSA opposed single-councillor wards in which proportional representation would not apply, arguing that the structure produced wasted votes, reduced choice for voters and unrepresentative results.

The PRSA also noted the general positive features of an unsubdivided electoral structure over a subdivided one. The unsubdivided electoral structure provided the maximum choice of candidates for voters and would encourage councillors to be equally informed about all areas, rather than be confined to knowledge of their own ward. It argued that an unsubdivided electoral structure was more likely to facilitate the representation of non-geographic communities of interest. In addition, wards would require the periodic re-adjustment of boundaries to cater for changes in enrolment numbers, while an unsubdivided structure could absorb changes to enrolment numbers.

The VEC's findings and options

Preliminary report findings

The small number of preliminary submissions to this review limits the VEC's insight into the community's experience of the current electoral structure, as well as the ability for the VEC to assess the longer-term effectiveness of the current electoral structure in Southern Grampians Shire.

In arriving at its preliminary options, the VEC turned to its own analysis and research, including information on population change and electoral participation within the Shire since the VEC's last review in 2007.

The VEC's analysis of the Shire's last three general elections informed consideration of the performance of the current electoral structure through the number and location of candidates and informal voting rate.

Number of councillors

Based on forecasted population numbers, the VEC believes that seven councillors would be appropriate for Southern Grampians Shire Council until at least the next scheduled representation review before the 2032 general election.

According to the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DEWLP), Southern Grampians Shire is projected to experience a slow rate of population decline. In its 2016 report, DEWLP projected the rate of population decline in the Shire to be -0.4 per cent from 2021 to 2031.⁴ Population forecasts from .id similarly indicated that the Shire's population will decline slightly by 2032.⁵

As a principle, the VEC seeks to ensure consistency across local government areas in Victoria. The VEC therefore compared Southern Grampians Shire with Country Victorian councils that have similar sized populations. The VEC found Southern Grampians Shire Council continues to fit comfortably within the range of seven-councillor Country Victorian councils.

⁴ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (Victoria), *Victoria in Future: Population and household projections to 2051*, Melbourne: State Government of Victoria, 2016, p. 15.

⁵ The VEC procures estimated population projection figures from .id. for a range of local government areas including Southern Grampians Shire.

Comparable Country Victoria councils to Southern Grampians Shire Council

Local council	Population (2016 Census)	Number of voters at last review	Current estimate of voters	Number of councillors	Number of voters per councillor
Hepburn Shire*	15,330	13,649	15,727	7	2,246
Swan Hill Rural City*	20,584	14,386	14,749	7	2,107
Murrindindi Shire*	13,732	13,727	14,570	7	2,081
Moyne Shire*	16,495	12,420	14,424	7	2,060
Indigo Shire	15,952	12,920	13,725	7	1,960
Corangamite Shire	16,051	13,397	13,584	7	1,940
Southern Grampians Shire*	15,944	13,151	13,436	7	1,919
Alpine Shire	12,337	11,562	11,929	7	1,704
Central Goldfields Shire	12,995	11,017	11,446	7	1,635
Northern Grampians Shire	11,439	10,540	10,882	7	1,554

* The local council is undergoing an electoral representation review by the VEC during 2019–20.

The VEC’s research on the Shire indicated that there was no compelling reason as to why Southern Grampians Shire Council should have more or less councillors than the current situation. For example, there were no indications of population growth pressures, significant socio-economic disparities or other special circumstances observed in the Shire that would warrant deviating away from the VEC’s consistent state-wide approach to the number of councillors. The VEC also considered the number of councillors in Southern Grampians Shire to be appropriate based on the number of voters to councillors, council’s management of a regional centre and a large rural area, and the needs of an aging population in the Shire.

Electoral structure

Retaining the current model

The VEC noted that the unsubdivided electoral structure has been in place in Southern Grampians Shire for over 20 years. The VEC also noted that the previous representation review described a ‘significant degree of interdependence’ between the Shire’s smaller towns and main

service centre of Hamilton. This finding contributed to the recommendation for the Shire to remain unsubdivided in 2007.

Considering the number of voters in the 2016 Census, the VEC found that approximately 60 per cent of the Shire's population currently reside in Hamilton, and that Hamilton remains the main service centre for the community. These characteristics indicate that the current electoral structure remains an appropriate option for Southern Grampians Shire Council going forward.

The VEC also considered relevant election statistics, which can provide an indication of whether democratic principles are thriving in local government elections. At each of the Shire's last three general elections (2008, 2012 and 2016), the VEC observed:

- there were between 10 and 13 candidates standing for seven positions in Council, providing voters with enough choice in candidates
- the percentage of informal votes at Southern Grampians Shire Council elections has not been high, at an overall average of 3.7 per cent
- the percentage of voters turning out at elections has been high, at an average of 83 per cent.⁶

Considering the locations and spread of candidates is another way to measure the fairness of an unsubdivided electoral structure. Results from the previous three elections indicated that most candidates were located in Hamilton, but also that there has been a growing number of candidates elected from smaller towns outside of Hamilton. During the 2016 election, there were three candidates from the smaller rural towns who were elected, suggesting that smaller communities of interest are still able to elect local representatives, rather than the major population centre being disproportionately represented.

Based on these observations, the VEC believes that the current electoral structure is likely to have delivered fair and equitable representation to Southern Grampians Shire's voters.

An alternative option of seven councillors elected from four wards

Given the small number of submissions received in the present representation review, the VEC sought to develop a subdivided electoral structure for consideration by the community. There are also positive features to electoral structures with multi-councillor and single-councillor wards. The VEC recognises that communities can have a strong sense of identity and connection with their local area, and that geographic communities of interest are more likely to be represented in subdivided electoral structures.

⁶ General election statistics are available at: Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC), 'Southern Grampians Shire Council Profile', <https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/ElectoralBoundaries/SouthernGrampiansProfile.html>, accessed 4 March 2019.

Two-ward model with seven councillors

The VEC received one submission that described a possible ward structure: the two-ward structure in Mr Stone's submission. The structure includes a Hamilton-based ward where four councillors would be elected, and a second ward for the remaining rural areas surrounding Hamilton, where three councillors would be elected. The VEC noted that this structure would reduce the possibility of uncontested single-councillor rural wards.

However, the VEC was concerned that the two-ward structure would create or entrench a rural–urban divide in the Shire. The VEC recognised that Mr Stone's suggestion sought to differentiate Hamilton from the surrounding rural communities and used Mr Stone's proposal to develop another option that may provide a similar outcome.

Four-ward model with seven councillors

During the previous representation review for the Southern Grampians Shire in 2007, the VEC received a larger number of preliminary submissions (33 submissions). Although most of these submissions supported an unsubdivided electoral structure, some of the submissions supported the introduction of wards. Wards generally support dedicated representation of geographic communities of interest and could provide an opportunity to ensure that both rural and urban residents have local representatives.

In 2007, the VEC put forward an alternative option of seven councillors elected from four wards. The option contained a Hamilton-based ward with four councillors and three single-councillor wards encompassing the rural areas surrounding Hamilton. In the current representation review, the VEC has returned to this option to consider whether it still provides effective representation of the Shire's geographic communities of interest and complies with the legislative equality requirement. The option consists of:

- a four-councillor Hamilton Ward, including the urban area of Hamilton
- a single-councillor West Ward, including Coleraine (the second largest town in the Shire), its surrounds and the area in the north-west of the Shire
- a single-councillor East Ward, including Dunkeld and part of the Grampians
- a single-councillor South Ward, encompassing the southern part of the Shire, including Peshurst.

The VEC considers that the option has several positive features. It broadly reflects the Shire's geographic communities of interest by including the largest towns outside of Hamilton in each of the rural wards. This would allow local representation for each of the rural areas outside of Hamilton. The option differs slightly from Mr Stone's model by splitting the multi-councillor Ward in Mr Stone's preliminary submission into three single-councillor wards.

In line with its earlier findings, the VEC found this option still provided meaningful groupings of the more prominent towns outside of Hamilton. In updating this option for the current representation review, the VEC has adjusted boundaries to ensure that enrolments are kept within the legislated tolerance now and until at least the next scheduled representation review before the Shire's 2032 general election.

In 2007 and now, this option is considered less favourable than an unsubdivided structure, for a few reasons:

- The structure would mean that rural voters in the Shire would have no say over electing urban councillors, and vice versa.
- The interdependence of the small towns and Hamilton in the Shire naturally lends itself to an unsubdivided electoral structure.
- The smaller number of candidates standing at previous elections meant that there was a higher probability of uncontested elections in some of the wards. At the 2016 election, there were 13 candidates, of which four were from the smaller towns outside of Hamilton. The VEC recognises that the number of candidates may be an issue for future elections with a subdivided electoral structure.

Options

The VEC is required by the Act to include a preferred option and may include one or more alternative options for the electoral structure in the preliminary report. The VEC considers both the options outlined below to offer fair and equitable representation for voters in the local council. Please see Appendix 1 for detailed maps of these options.

Option A (preferred option)

Southern Grampians Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from an unsubdivided electoral structure.

Option B (alternative option)

Southern Grampians Shire Council consist of seven councillors elected from one four-councillor ward and three single-councillor wards.

Ward names

The VEC has suggested ward names in Option B to identify the wards. The VEC invites comments from the community on these ward names as part of submissions responding to the preliminary report.

Next steps

Response submissions

Any person or group, including the council, can make a submission to the VEC in response to the options contained in this report. Response submissions to the preliminary report should address the models proposed by the VEC within this report. Response submissions must be received by the VEC by 5.00 pm on Wednesday 17 April 2019. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Submissions must include the full name, address and contact telephone number of the submitter. Submissions without this information cannot be accepted.

Submission methods

Submissions can be made via:



The online submission form at vec.vic.gov.au



Email at southerngrampians.review@vec.vic.gov.au



Post to
Victorian Electoral Commission
Level 11, 530 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

Public access to submissions

To ensure transparency in the electoral representation review process, all submissions will be available for public inspection at:

- the VEC website at vec.vic.gov.au
- the VEC office at Level 11, 530 Collins Street, Melbourne.

The VEC will remove personal information such as address, phone number and signature, if applicable, from all public copies. However, the full name and locality of submitters will be displayed.

Public hearing

There is an opportunity for people or organisations who have made a response submission to speak about their submission at the public hearing. The public hearing is scheduled to be held at 6.00 pm on Tuesday 23 April 2019 in the Ted Kenna Room, Hamilton Performing Arts Centre, Brown Street, Hamilton. If you wish to speak at the public hearing, you **must** indicate this on your response submission. If there are no requests to speak at the hearing, it will not be held.

Final report

Following the public hearing, the VEC considers all the evidence it has gathered and publishes a final report for the Minister for Local Government containing a recommended electoral structure. The report is scheduled to be published on Wednesday 15 May 2019. Any changes resulting from the final report will apply at the October 2020 general election.

The final report will be available from the VEC by visiting vec.vic.gov.au or calling 131 832 and for inspection at the offices of Southern Grampians Shire Council.

Appendix 1: Option maps

The following maps are included in this report:

<i>Map</i>	<i>Page</i>
Option A (preferred option)	17
Option B (alternative option)	18

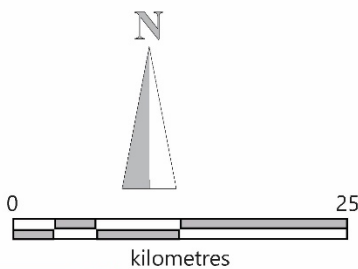
Southern Grampians Shire Council

Option A

(Preferred Option)



- Legend**
- Proposed Boundary
 - Existing Wards**
 - Unsubdivided
 - Map Symbols**
 - Freeway
 - Main Road
 - Collector Road
 - Road
 - Unsealed Road
 - Railway Line
 - River/Creek
 - Park / Reserve
 - Lake
 - Locality Boundary



Ward	Councillors	Electors*	Area sq km
Unsubdivided	7	13,151	6,652.67
Total	7	13,151	6,652.67
Average	7	1,879	6,652.67

*Elector numbers at 25th Oct 2018

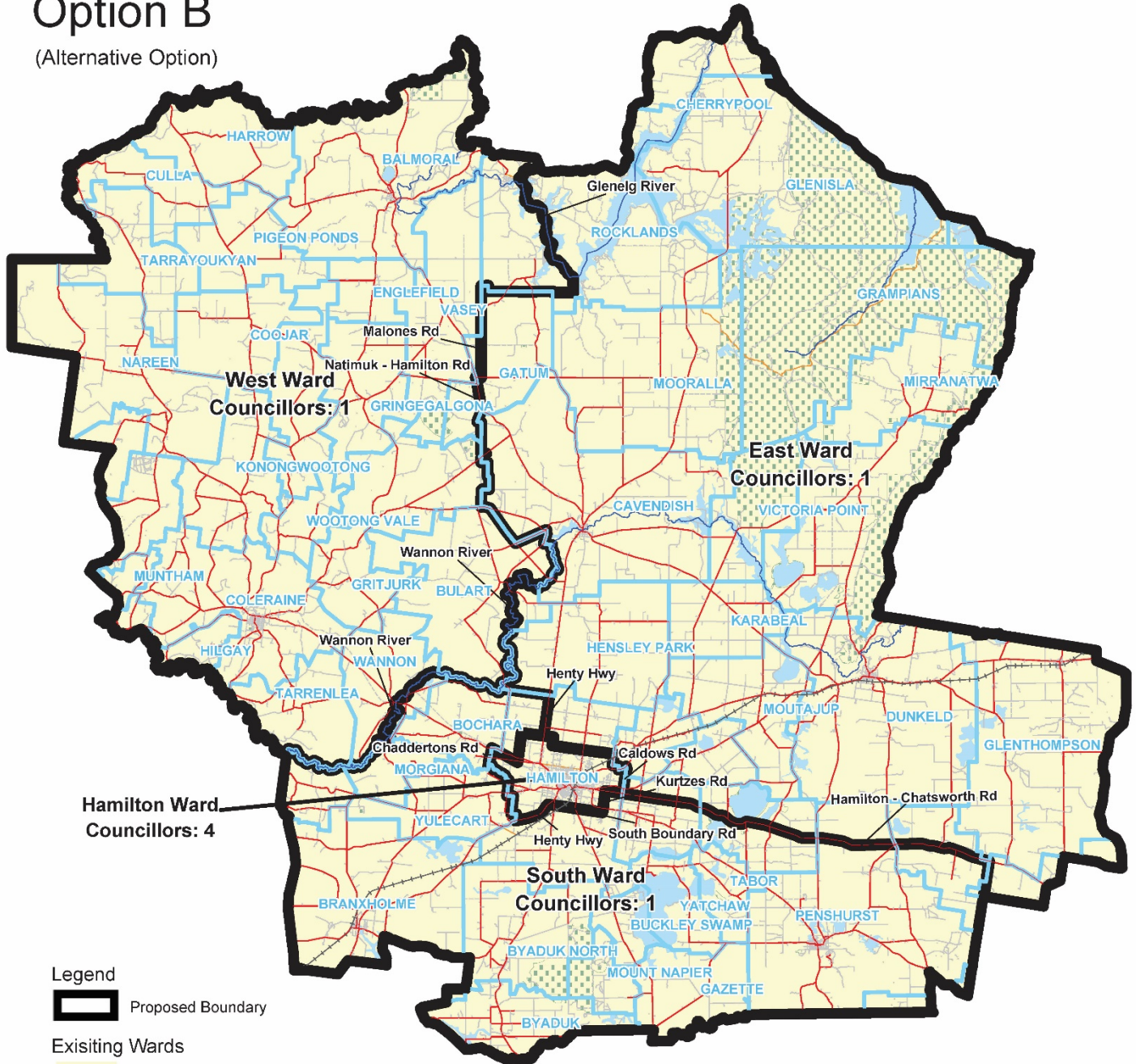


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Southern Grampians Shire Council Option B

(Alternative Option)



Legend

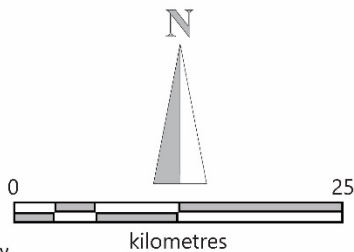
Proposed Boundary

Existing Wards

Unsubdivided

Map Symbols

- Freeway
- Main Road
- Collector Road
- Road
- Unsealed Road
- Railway Line
- River/Creek
- Park / Reserve
- Lake
- Locality Boundary



Ward	Councillors	Electors*	Deviation	Area sq km
East	1	1,998	6.33%	3,181.83
Hamilton	4	7,344	-2.29%	36,338
South	1	1,849	-1.60%	1,397.82
West	1	1,960	4.31%	2,036.69
Total	7	13,151	-2.29% to +6.33%	6,652.67
Average	0	1,879		950.38

*Elector numbers at 25th Oct 2018

Appendix 2: List of preliminary submissions

Two preliminary submissions were received in total. Submissions were made by:

John T. Stone

Proportional Representation Society Australia (Victoria-Tasmania) Inc.

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2019