VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

News Note

NOTE TO MEMBERS – 08 August 2017

FIRE SERVICES BILL SELECT COMMITTEE – INTERIM REPORT

This afternoon, the Fire Services Bill Select Committee tabled its interim report on its inquiry into the fire services bill. The interim report does not make any recommendations or findings, but rather sets out the consultation process undertaken by the Select Committee and includes a consolidated volume of all Transcripts from its public hearings.

The Committee's interim report notes that the final report will be presented in mid-August.

It is VFBV's understanding that the Bill is therefore unlikely to be debated in Parliament this week, and is likely to be held over for the following sitting week, which begins on Tuesday 22nd August.

In speaking to the interim report, speakers from all sides of the political spectrum acknowledged the Committee was grappling with the huge number of public submissions (over 1,800) in the very short time the Committee has been sitting, and the enormous workload involved in working through the evidence submitted to the Committee.

The sentiment expressed by those speaking to the interim report was that given the workload of the Committee, and the fact that evidence from questions on notice were still being received, the Committee has opted for a small extension to ensure all submissions and evidence is given appropriate time to be considered and deliberated on.

VFBV supports the sentiment that the reforms proposed by the Bill require thorough and robust analysis and consideration, and therefore supports the Committee's decision to postpone its final report for when it has had time to properly consider the evidence presented to it.

INTERIM REPORT

The interim report noted that considerable evidence relevant to the Bill and related matters had been provided, including:

- the case for a fire service restructure
- linkage of 'presumptive rights' legislative provisions with fire services restructure legislative provisions
- proposed amendments to the metropolitan fire district
- changing demands on volunteers
- recruitment, retention and supporting volunteers

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- the need to improve interoperability between fire services, such as equipment, training and processes
- impact of industrial relations disputes on morale in the fire services
- government consultation on the reforms in the proposed Bill
- whether the proposed reforms will impact on surge capacity
- secondment arrangements proposed in the Bill
- impact on integrated brigades
- importance of response times.

It was noted the committee will consider these issues in preparing its final report which they intend to table in mid-August.

OTHER ISSUES RAISED BY VFBV

Whilst not listed in the interim report, VFBV is hopeful – based on the evidence submitted to the Committee, that the final report may also touch on other important issues that we feel have been raised with the Committee by volunteers such as;

- the flexibility and adaptability of the current CFA model and the effect of its elimination under the proposed Bill;
- the reduced flexibility proposed by the Bill for CFA to support future service delivery gaps
- effects of organisational and structural change on local community engagement and social capital;
- balancing the importance of prevention/community engagement with suppression
- the lack of proper impact and cost analysis including ongoing effects on the fire service property levy;
- the continuing role of volunteer brigades that find themselves located inside the FRV district whether co-located within FRV fire stations or, because of further boundary change under the proposed Bill as stand-alone volunteer brigades
- the dilution of the powers of the CFA Chief Officer over his/her workforce and brigades

In a nutshell, VFBV's position is that the legislation is so flawed from a conceptual level through to its negative practical effect "in the field" it should be rejected. The proposed legislation does not provide any demonstrable community safety outcome, and seeks to simply change badges on the side of fire trucks to further an industrial agenda. The proposed legislation eliminates the existing flexibility contained in the current CFA Act and seeks to remove the ability for CFA to appoint paid operational staff to supplement and support volunteers in a fully integrated manner.

In our view, there is no regime of amendments that could correct its faults. We are not opposed to change but it must be based in factual analysis, be the subject of proper consultation throughout the community, be cost effective to the Victorian tax payer, provide for demonstrable and measurable improvements in public safety and be an effective balance between prevention, community engagement and activation, response and recovery.

VFBV welcomes any reforms that improve the way Victorian Fire Services work but these reforms need to be developed collaboratively, openly and most importantly – transparently.

We ask that members continue to lobby and inform their local MPs, particularly Upper House (Legislative Council) MPs who are expected to debate and vote on the Bill later this month.

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