

Feedback
To the Local Government Board Tasmania
re: Review of LGAs and Proposed Boundary Changes
from
Meander Progress Association Inc.

Background

Meander Progress Association Inc (MPA) is a small not-for-profit organization formed in the village of Meander in the Meander Valley Local Government Area (MVLGA). The association's strategic plan states our Vision is that "The village of Meander is a tidy, welcoming and aesthetically pleasing place for locals and visitors". And the purpose of the group is "To support the creation, maintenance and improvement of public spaces within the village of Meander".

Our community, the Meander community, is quite close to the central southern boundary of the MVLGA. Ours is the main group in our area that develops and supports projects for the benefit of local residents. MPA has a small number of financial members supported by an excellent financial manager, local residents and Meander Valley Council (MVC).

From the outset, we want to make it clear that none of the scenarios outlined in the community information packs are acceptable to our community. All boundary adjustments suggested would marginalise our area, reduce support from our council and decrease core services it supplies. We are confident that MVC compares favourably with other LGAs and probably out-performs many. MVC should be applauded as an example of best practise rather than being plundered for its growth areas to boost under-performing Launceston.

Interim Report Summary and Community Information Packs

Firstly, we find it difficult to give targeted feedback because the Interim Report and Community Information packs are very much lacking in detail and specifics on **how** proposed changes 1.) benefit the residents and rate payers, 2.) improve and sustain core services 3.) increase efficiencies or 4.) meet future challenges. The report states that the "majority of Tasmanians believe we have too many councils for our population". But the fact that Tasmania already has fewer councils per capita than some other states is overlooked. So, what makes Tasmanian councils so inefficient or so ill-equipped to manage the future issues and challenges of the next 30+ years? And in particular, in what way is MVC seen to be deficient – again no detail.

1. Community Needs

Despite being geographically one of the larger LGAs in the north of the state, MVC has a stable and, in some areas, growing rate base and serves its residents very well. We consider that the MVLGA is an optimal size with a good balance of sparsely populated rural areas, more densely populated townships, and one or two growing semi-rural/suburban areas with a smattering of industrial enterprises.

The Interim Report and information packs talk about "communities of interest" and defines them as groups of people with "common needs, geography, and connections to one another". We would argue that of all the proposals, as presented in the information packs, none would have a clear benefit to the MVLGA. And all would marginalize our community with less financial or in-kind

support from any new larger council. Our community envisages severely decreased council support residents gain, through groups such as ours, outside the core services that all councils are and will still be expected to deliver.

We were told at a MVC information session that in the last LGA review, councils were given at least one/two growth areas as a rate base to support their sustainability. None of the proposed boundary changes shown in the information packs (which, are very difficult to determine – the maps are of such poor quality), offer MVC a growing rate base to support sustainability into the future. It is therefore assumed that if the current growth areas are absorbed into Greater Launceston as proposed, what is left would become a smaller less efficient council and/or ultimately be included in other LGAs and our Meander community would have neither “common needs” nor “connections” with what would ultimately be a very large LGA indeed. As stated previously, there is no clearly stated benefit for MVC residents and rate payers in any of the scenarios, and amalgamation with Northern Midlands (which would also have its growth areas of Perth, Evandale and Longford absorbed by Greater Launceston), the new LGA would be asked to deliver more services to a far wider area with financially less to accomplish it.

The LGB has based the proposed scenarios around the Productivity Commission 2017 “communities of interest” as illustrated by commuting statistics. The information packs are full of figures and percentages concerning the commuting population. It has neglected to consider that people work where they have to, but generally choose where they live. It completely disregards the agricultural sector and the small communities it supports. By doing so, it belittles the value of rural communities. These areas are by nature smaller “communities of interest” and have nothing whatsoever to do with commuting to larger centres. When new residents to our Meander community are asked why they have relocated here, there are various reasons. But overwhelmingly “natural beauty”, “created landscape”, and “serviced surroundings” is mentioned, none of which has anything to do with commuting anywhere. We rely on all levels of government to manage our natural beauty, but it is through groups such as MPA working closely with a supportive council, that help maintain the amenity of our community. Under the LGB’s current proposals that close relationship with Council and its staff would be lost.

2. Jobs and Services

The Interim Report initially acknowledges that “smaller rural communities value different things about their local council than... large city neighbourhoods” and “people in smaller communities interact more frequently” with their local council. In point 2 it talks about “keeping people living in and contributing to these communities in an era when services and employment is being concentrated in more urban centres”. And yet the proposed changes are in a large part based around data and analysis of the population commuting the larger centres, thereby drawing people away. We would argue that people who live in small rural communities such as ours also work in those communities and in our case our “first port of call” for local government would be with Launceston – over an hour away.

Our group has found that MVC has been very happy to accommodate our group with support for community projects. Our liaison officer is well known by many of MVC staff members, and they know that when MPA approaches council with a request or proposal, it is almost always council assistance we need not the job done for us. We fail to see how this close working relationship would continue with a new LGA at least twice as big. It would be imperative that existing local centres be kept in place to assist communities already known to them.

3. Local Voice

The LGB has acknowledged that “increasing the size of councils could reduce the capacity of local communities to retain a local voice.” But also says that “creating larger, more capable councils can

improve community engagement...” There seems to be some contradiction here. How can it work both ways? What would this community engagement look like? How can there be fair representation from all corners of a much larger LGA? How can representatives know of, much less care about, issues in small communities that they do not live or actively participate in? If effective community engagement is to be “enhanced”, it seems that, with increasing the size of the LGA there would need to be an increase in the number of elected councillors to represent smaller communities and champion their needs, contradicting the notion of “communities of interest” being linked to larger centres.

4. Funding

The Interim Report states “changes will flow through to the community in terms of how existing rating is redistributed.” In all the models proposed, MVC would lose all the major growth areas, thereby severely limiting its ability to raise funds through rates to sustainably meet future needs of its residents. Perhaps the area of greatest concern for our small rural community is that, if amalgamations go ahead, rates will substantially increase, and services and support must dramatically decrease as the spread of funds become very thin over a larger area. Nobody should have to accept paying more for less.

5. Transition

“It ain’t broke – don’t fix it.”

MVLGA is not broke. Any perceived benefits to our rural community from being absorbed into a Greater Launceston, Northern Midland or Central LGA would be far outweighed by negatives. The LGB asserts that “one council being subsumed by another” is not the intention but that a “shared sense of ownership” will be necessary to consolidate the new LGAs with new identities and administrative structures.

We contend that the State Government and the LGB simply viewed any problems with this tier of government through a lens of too many councils. It seems they contend that the existence of twenty-nine councils creates a climate of inefficiency through duplication which has the potential to exhaust any ability to meet future challenges. We contend that rather than a transition to a smaller number of councils, the LGB and State Government should be investigating ways to create efficiencies and sustainability within local government as a whole, before adjusting boundaries that will marginalise small pockets of the state.

One suggestion would be to install a statewide common IT system. This is in place for the Department of Education, why not for LGAs? The Interim report acknowledges that populations are more mobile and that COVID made it clear that people can work remotely. A common IT system would support both of these and reduce duplication.

Supporting a more collegiate approach to delivery and sharing of services by staff would improve efficiency. With less of a silo structure but supported interaction and professional learning, the Tasmanian population, and rate-payers in particular, could have clearer understanding of what to expect from their council no matter where they lived in the state. We are certain that councils can offer other pertinent suggestions that would improve and enhance the way “they work for their communities into the future” without amalgamations.

In conclusion, Meander Progress Association urges the Local Government Board to rethink all the scenarios put forward involving the Meander Valley Local Government Area and give proper consideration to, negative impacts and benefits any changes would have for small rural communities.