

A Municipality of Our Own

If the Bellarine was a nation, on some population scenarios there would be nine smaller countries in the world. Similarly, if it were to again become a separate municipality, it would be the fifth largest regional city in Victoria – and approaching the size of some metropolitan municipalities such as Yarra and Maribyrnong.

Background

The City of Greater Geelong (CoGG) was created following a 1993 Victorian Government decision to amalgamate local government entities across the state. With an area of 1252 square kilometres and a population of 265,000 (which is projected to grow to 400,000 by 2040) it is by far the largest regional city in Victoria – and the 2nd largest municipality in the state.

For the previous 140 years the Rural City of Bellarine and its predecessors were the local government area for the 332 square kilometre peninsula and its residents.

There have recently been calls from various quarters – including the current Mayor of CoGG – for the establishment of a separate municipality for the Bellarine. At its meeting of 16th October 2021, the CBCA agreed to further consider the possibility.

Issues

Since the 1993 amalgamation, there has been an ongoing background level of community hankering for the “good old days of the Shire”, reflections on a perceived decline in service levels and suggestions that metro Geelong gets a disproportionate share of Council expenditure and attention. It is often remarked that Geelong can afford a multi-million dollar floating Christmas tree on Corio Bay while many parts of our towns don't have footpaths!

More recently, contentious CoGG management of consultation around issues such as the proposed North Bellarine Aquatic Centre, relocation of the Drysdale sports precinct and the development of a new masterplan for the Portarlington Recreation Reserve etc have fuelled increased community discussion about the wisdom of a separation.

In many respects, CoGG administration has been tone deaf to rising levels of dissatisfaction from the Bellarine. For instance, in his 16/10/21 meeting with the CBCA the CEO of CoGG (Martin Cutter) refused to even give consideration to the establishment of an administrative structure or “desk” to recognise the historic and cultural differences of the Bellarine.

Since the 1993 amalgamations, in Victoria there has been one de-amalgamation (Wangaratta and Mansfield in 2002). There was recent media speculation (ABC radio 774) about the desirability of the Borough of Queenscliff being absorbed into CoGG. There has also been recent public speculation (The Age) of a move by Sunbury to separate from the City of Hume. And there have been a number of separations in Queensland:

- Douglas Shire de-amalgamated from Cairns Regional Council
- Isis Shire de-amalgamated from Bundaberg Regional Council
- Livingston Shire de-amalgamated from Rockhampton Regional Council
- Mareeba Shire de-amalgamated from Mareeba-Tablelands Regional Council
- Noosa Shire de-amalgamated from Sunshine Coast Regional Council

Cultural and Demographic Differences

There would appear to be substantial cultural and demographic differences between the Bellarine and metro Geelong. The former comprises of small to medium sized coastal settlements with little heavy industry and having most economic activity centred around retail, tourism, hospitality and agriculture/viticulture. The latter is more concentrated with a focus on manufacturing and service industries and increasingly as a dormitory area for Melbourne. 50% of the population of the northern Bellarine (postcode 3223) is aged over 60 whereas only 26% of metro Geelong (3220) are in that age bracket.

Revenue Share

The Bellarine constitutes 20% of the population of CoGG. The revenue/expenditure base of the city is \$550m. Hence, in broad terms, if the Bellarine were to have a proportionate share that would amount to an annual budget in excess of \$100m.

Process

There doesn't appear to be a clearly defined process under the Victorian Local Government Act for municipal de-amalgamation. The process that was followed in Queensland included:

- A community wishing to de-amalgamate had to submit a petition signed by 20% of the voting population;
- produce a detailed estimate of the potential financial costs; and
- proposals were then put to a poll of voters for a majority vote on de-amalgamation.

Options

There are a number of potential options for a separate municipality:

- Bellarine only (55,000 people)
- Bellarine + Surf Coast (85,000)
- Bellarine + Surf Coast + BoQ¹ (88,000)
- Bellarine + BoQ¹ (58,000)
- North Bellarine² (30,000)
- Other

¹ *The strongly expressed view in no uncertain terms of representatives of the Borough to remain as an independent entity is recognised. It's inclusion here is for the purpose of keeping all options on the table at this stage – particularly in light of CoGG's intransigence on a unified Point Lonsdale and the recent media airing of the desirability of the Borough being merged with CoGG.*

² *Drysdale/Clifton Springs/Curlewis, Portarlington, Indented Head, St Leonards and adjoining rural communities*

Next Steps

- Each association to canvas with their members whether there is an appetite to further explore the possibility of a separate Bellarine municipality – and report back to an early CBCA meeting in 2022.
- Subject to the above, the CBCA to then further consider the establishment and resourcing of a feasibility study.

For discussion