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## **NORTH & WEST MELBOURNE ASSOCIATION INC.**

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For those who live or work in North or West Melbourne

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### **PROPOSED LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ELECTORAL) REGULATIONS 2016**

The writers of this document are authorized by the North and West Melbourne Association Inc. (NWMA) to make this submission.

The NWMA has been concerned for many years about the flawed electoral system at the City of Melbourne (COM). Whilst the concerns are extensive and well founded, we do not intend to cover these in detail in this document but will only address the issues raised in the discussion paper. In respect to these serious concerns, we would be happy to meet with the Minister to elaborate on these flaws in the electoral system that require such substantial reform.

We would welcome the increase in the candidate's statement from 150 words to 200 and we would welcome the concept of set questions for candidates; however, those contained in the discussion paper are regarded as inadequate... For example, we consider that constituents would also like to know the principal place of residence of the candidate and an explanation of the candidate's links to the electorate. The major concern in the COM is that many successful candidates have little or no links with the municipality, a very limited understanding of the serious issues facing the constituency and, in most cases, are unknown in the wider local community. This alarming situation arises from the lack of wards in the municipality, a system introduced, many believe, to minimize the influence of residents and small business on the Council.

Whilst the NWMA members have expressed concern on many occasions about the postal voting system that cannot be audited in any meaningful way, please do not assume that this response is endorsing the postal voting system.

We believe the VEC electoral pack should be the **only** means of the candidate communicating with the voter and should contain all material including a photograph and a 'how to vote' card that a voter should need to make a decision.

The VEC's argument that they are conflicted because the pack contains a 'how to vote' card is difficult to accept when they have proposed including a 200 word political statement. In the COM, we have been advised that 60% of the voters do not have a mailing address in the municipality and we are further advised that if a candidate were to engage in the traditional method of letterboxing, they would only make contact with 16% of those on the roll. This results from such a high percentage of voters having a mailing address outside the municipality and numerous high rise developments where access to mailboxes is restricted or prohibited.

We believe the failed electoral system as outlined above is a direct cause of the conflict of interest situation that has bedevilled the Council decision making process on at least 15 times to date in the term of the current Council. Candidates require enormous sums of money, generally provided by the real estate development industry, in order to fund their electoral campaign and particularly mail-outs. Remember, if you stand for election at the COM, you have more voters than a Federal electorate, three times as many as a State lower house electorate and they are much more widely dispersed.

We support the extension of time for the voting receipt period.

The remaining points in part 1 are procedural in nature and we support them where they improve the transparency and democracy of the system.

In respect to part 2 of the discussion paper, we see a number of matters raised are procedural and if they improve this flawed system, we welcome them.

It is patently clear that the current system at the COM is flawed because it cannot be audited. We believe that the Minister should use all her powers to restore a transparent and legitimate system which would include the optional preferential voting system which has been supported by the ALP for election to the Victorian Legislative Council.

In respect to the section **voting in postal elections** on page 7, we are alarmed that there is no recognition in this section that the VEC does not have the power to exclude any ballot. The requirement that the voter must complete the declaration envelopes appears to be farcical because they do not have the power to exclude any ballot based on the declaration on the envelope.

The **Campaign Donation Returns** section appears to have removed the \$500 limit and also fails to clarify the gift of goods and services. How do you place an 'estimated market value' on the contribution of a volunteer who may have letter boxed or done some basic drafting and design of electoral material? The distinction between volunteer and the provision of goods and services is very unclear. We consider that our recommendation above, limiting communication to the voter through the VEC, obviates this confusion. It is time that a level playing field was created at local government elections for all candidates.

We believe the COM electoral system is fundamentally flawed and requires a thorough overhaul to restore democracy and public confidence in the system of governance. Even so, the issues/changes we have raised in this submission can make an important difference and we encourage you to give them your serious consideration.

Kevin Chamberlin  
Chair

Bill Cook  
Committee Member