

Why replacing local councillors is setting Victorians back \$180,000



Rachael Dexter *The Age*, January 14, 2026 — 5:30am

Victorian ratepayers are copping hundreds of thousands of dollars in unbudgeted costs when councillors quit their posts early, after a shift in local government structures caused the cost of filling a vacancy to jump more than 100-fold.

The Age can reveal that for the byelections in Darebin, Whittlesea and Wodonga – all held over the last six months – locals have had to pay between \$130,000 and \$180,000 to replace single councillors instead of the roughly \$1000 it previously cost.



The VEC sorting ballots during the 2024 Victorian council elections. LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

These unbudgeted expenses are another unintended consequence of the shift to what’s known as “single member wards” in most councils, which took effect at the 2024 local council elections.

Under the previous system, larger wards were represented by multiple councillors. If a vacancy occurred, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) used a “countback” of existing votes to elect the next candidate at a cost the VEC says was roughly \$1000. But under the new single-member ward structure, where only one person represents an area, the VEC says legislation prevents a countback due to preferential voting being used over proportional systems.

“This means that if a vacancy occurs, it is not possible to then elect another candidate from the same pool of votes, meaning a byelection is required,” a VEC spokesman said.

Byelection costs for local councils in 2025

- Whittlesea \$183,537
- Wodonga \$140,000
- Darebin \$131,327
- Bendigo TBC

Despite the price tag, voter turnout in single-ward contests is generally lower than at election time. In Darebin, turnout for the August byelection was 76.22 per cent, down from 81.57 per cent during the 2024 general election. Similarly, the Whittlesea byelection in the Lalor Ward saw participation drop to 74.33 per cent, compared with 80.41 per cent in 2024.

The huge costs have sharpened criticism of the [controversial changes](#) that were introduced by then-local government minister and one-time Labor factional powerbroker [Adem Somyurek](#). Victorian Ratepayers and Residents Association secretary Tanya Tescher said it was “obviously not fair that the cost of an expensive byelection be shunted onto local ratepayers”, and argued for a legislative overhaul to revert to the previous system.

Tescher, a former councillor, [who left her post early](#) for health reasons, argued those removed for bad behaviour should contribute to the bill.

In Whittlesea, an August byelection triggered by a scandal where a councillor was removed over [vote tampering](#) cost \$183,537. City of Whittlesea CEO Craig Lloyd said the council picked up the tab, while another \$39,292 was recovered by the VEC to contest the initial election outcome.



Tanya Tescher, Secretary of the Victorian Ratepayers and Residents Association. JOE ARMAO

Another byelection in Whittlesea is imminent after councillor Nic Brooks resigned this week. Brooks told *The Age* he was unable to keep up with the workload as councillor on top of running his security and tech business, but said the high cost weighed on him.



- [Victorian council elections](#)

VEC demands e-voting, party membership disclosure in council elections

“I mean, you don’t want decisions that you make to have negative impact on ratepayers,” he said. “That doesn’t seem like a fair cost for ratepayers, really ... because these things are gonna happen”. A council spokeswoman said the cost of the second byelection was expected to be similar to the first.

In Darebin, the death of [veteran councillor Gaetano Greco](#) last August prompted a \$131,327 byelection.

Leadership at both Whittlesea and Darebin said they treated byelections as unforeseen events, and argued facilitating these votes is an example of cost-shifting burdens from the state government that local councils are forced to wear.

Bendigo residents are also on the hook for an upcoming by-election after a councillor John McIlrath quit to focus on his business, while Wodonga Council held a by-election in October at a cost of \$140,000 after councillor Hannah Seymour resigned to be closer to her “personal support network” outside Victoria.

Seymour said she was unaware of the cost her community would incur before she quit.

“What I think deserves more attention is the shift to the single-councillor ward system itself – a change made without direct community consultation – and the broader consequences it has for local governance and communities,” she told *The Age*.

By contrast, McIlrath said he was aware of the cost, but shrugged it off.

“Of course it weighs on you. But at the same point, have a look at all the governments around – they don’t care about costs. They just throw it away.”



An entire Victorian council just got elected without a single vote cast

McIlrath said the single member ward structure was ironically one of the reasons he threw in the towel, saying it led to a huge increase in workload.

“We were told [during councillor training pre-election] it would be two to four hours a week plus monthly meetings,” he said.

Instead, it ended up being about eight hours of meetings, eight hours of reading, plus time catching up with locals and groups who wanted meetings each week, McIlrath said.

Kathryn Arndt, chief executive of the Victorian Local Governance Association, said would-be councillors need more training to avoid early departures and high costs. A recent survey found many did not fully understand the scope of the role, leaving them overwhelmed.

First proposed in 2019, the push for single wards was shepherded through the Victorian parliament by Labor – with the support of the Victorian opposition – after Somyurek was sacked from the ministry due to branch-stacking allegations.

Beyond the increase in cost, the changes have also led to decreased competition in some areas. Across the state, 47 candidates (including an entire councillor group) secured council seats without a single vote being cast due to a lack of opponents.

The VEC said to minimise costs, it attempted to schedule byelections at the same time. However, the spokesman said byelections remain more involved than count backs as they have “all the same tasks as a normal election, from enrolment to printing ballots to counting votes.”

A Victorian government spokesperson said single-member wards made councillors “more accountable to the communities they serve and councils more reflective of the communities they represent.”

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