

Inner west mega council proposed as Baird's deadline nears

SMH November 11, 2015
Jacob Saulwick

An inner west mega council could be established in the wake of contentious meetings called in response to the Premier's push for voluntary amalgamations.

Leichhardt, Marrickville and Ashfield councils have endorsed the idea of a merger, should the Baird government proceed with compulsory amalgamations across the city.

But the council resolutions have been controversial, with independent and Greens councillors accusing Labor and Liberal counterparts of rolling over to implement the government's agenda.



Leichhardt says it has shared similarities and interests with Marrickville and Ashfield. Photo: Michel O'Sullivan

When Premier Mike Baird and Local Government Minister Paul Toole announced last month they would give councils four weeks to reconsider their merger plans, a number of councils stiffened their opposition to any amalgamations.

The problem, as local government expert Graham Sansom put it, was that it appeared councils were being asked to "save the government's bacon" by agreeing to mergers they had previously opposed.

But some councils have started to budge. For instance, Wyong Council has agreed to merge with Gosford Council, and the mayors of both councils were to meet with Mr Toole on Wednesday.

And on Tuesday night, the Hills Shire Council nominated Hawkesbury as its preferred merger partner.

In the inner west, meanwhile, Leichhardt, Marrickville and Ashfield all agreed at Tuesday meetings to merge provided the government moved to forcibly amalgamate other councils.

According to the councils, controlled by Labor mayors, their first preference remains not to merge. The three councils also say their agreement means they will not have to if the government does not forcibly amalgamate other councils.

But the councils say they have legal advice suggesting the government has the power to dismiss councils if they did not agree to amalgamations, and say they would miss out on \$25 million if they did not voluntarily submit merger proposals.

"Talks between Ashfield, Leichhardt and Marrickville pinpointed shared similarities and interests, including a similar approach to development and heritage, as well as strong social and cultural links between residents in all three communities," a statement from the three councils said.

But Greens and independent councillors have opposed the move, while the Greens also have legal advice that questions whether the government could successfully sack functioning councils.

"We shouldn't be putting in a merger option," said Greens councillor Rochelle Porteous.

"They are saying the most important thing is not to be sacked - well, it is very difficult to sack a council which is financially stable, doing a good job, and has a good standing in its community, which is the situation in Leichhardt," she said.

"Overwhelmingly, our communities don't want us to merge."

Under the government's timetable, councils have until next Wednesday to propose new merger plans. But neither Mr Baird nor Mr Toole have said what they would do if councils did not submit new plans.

Waverley and Randwick councils have already resolved to merge, as have Canada Bay, Auburn and Burwood. The government has touted a \$2 billion savings figure over 20 years if more councils amalgamate.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/inner-west-mega-council-proposed-as-bairds-deadline-nears-20151111-gkw78w.html>