

Waverley votes to hold plebiscite on council mergers amid federal election campaign

SMH May 18, 2016
Anne Davies



COUNCIL MERGERS ANNOUNCED

The Baird government has created 19 new councils across Sydney and NSW.

- Comment: There are reasons to merge councils, but not the ones Baird is using

Council mergers are set to become a front of mind issue during the federal election campaign in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's own seat of Wentworth.

In a shock move, Waverley Council voted on Tuesday night to hold a municipality-wide poll on whether to support a merger with Randwick and Woollahra, as proposed by the NSW state government, with councillors urging that the vote be held concurrently with the federal election on July 2.

The move threatens to complicate campaigning for Mr Turnbull in the seat of Wentworth, which encompasses Waverley.

But those councillors who voted for the motion -- three Labor, the Green, an independent and one Liberal -- will be racing against time to make the vote happen.



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull could see a plebiscite on council mergers in part of his federal seat. Photo: Andrew Meares

Last week the state government, led by Liberal premier Mike Baird, decreed 19 mergers, sacking all the councillors and appointing administrators. The three way merger of Randwick, Waverley and Woollahra is one of several held up by legal challenges.

A decision on Woollahra's court case is expected within a week or two. If it loses, the Baird government is likely to move swiftly to finalise the remaining mergers and put an end to the political haemorrhaging over the issue.

In some regional seats, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce's seat of New England, council amalgamations are prompting white hot anger and he personally has been critical of the state Coalition.

The Waverley mayor, Sally Betts, a Liberal who also works for Mr Turnbull as an electorate officer, opposed the poll, claiming that a survey of 600 residents a year ago had established support for a merger.

But this was derided by Labor councillor Ingrid Strew, who described it as "a dodgy poll".

Cr Strew said she knew of no-one who received the information brochure distributed prior to the survey. Residents were asked to pick between several different merger options with a final option of no merger. Even so, 36 per cent of people opposed it outright.

Labor's John Wakefield, said some might see it as too late or a merger a foregone conclusion: 'I believe it's not my right to tell you what to do; it's your right to tell me,' he said to cheers from the gallery.

Mayor Betts has been one of the early champions of council amalgamations. Waverley and Randwick voted early to merge, with the mayor saying she considered the mergers inevitable and that it was better to support the Baird government's proposal rather than be forced to merge.

A power broker within the Eastern Suburbs Liberal branches, Mayor Betts is widely expected to put herself forward as mayor of the new super council if the merger goes ahead.



Waverly Council's mayor Sally Betts opposed the plebiscite. Photo: Supplied

But the merger is on hold due to a legal challenge by Woollahra Council, which is strongly opposed. A decision in the Land and Environment Court is expected in the next fortnight.

If successful, Woollahra's challenge would delay the merger but would not block it permanently. Instead, the Boundaries Commission would be required to re-open the public consultation and hold fresh public hearings.

Several other councils opposing mergers including Hunters Hill, Ku-ring-gai, and Mosman are running similar legal challenges, which will hinge on the outcome in the Woollahra case.

Whether an overwhelming plebiscite would cause the Baird government to re-think the matter remains to be seen. It has backed off a merger between the Shoalhaven and Kiama after a plebiscite in Kiama drew a 50 per cent turnout and a 95 per cent vote against amalgamation. Kiama is in the marginal federal seat of Gilmore.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/waverley-votes-to-hold-plebiscite-on-council-mergers-amid-federal-election-campaign-20160517-goxf3l.html>