

# Council amalgamations could spark Sydney's biggest land grab

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*Mayor Toni Zelter at the Woollahra Council offices, which would be worth up to \$40 million if rezoned.*

**SYDNEY'S council mergers have sparked a multi-million dollar land grab as developers eye grand old town halls, prime harbourside land and other valuable real estate gems that could become surplus to requirements.**

Ratepayer-owned crown jewels including historic council chambers, waterfront properties and leisure sites across the city could all go on sale after Sydney's 43 councils are slashed to just 25 following planned amalgamations.

Community groups, including dance classes and playgroups, have expressed concerns about losing venues they've used for years, forcing them to travel further afield.



*Woollahra council chamber could be sold off when the councils merge. Picture: Justin Lloyd*



*Veronica O'Shaughnessy and Chescia Tunley view Murray Rose Pool, formerly Red Leaf Pool, which sits below Woollahra council chambers at Double Bay. Picture: Justin Lloyd*

But developers are salivating over the potential sell-off, which some mayors believe are inevitable once mergers are completed and duplicated buildings become redundant.

Asset sales are not part of the estimated \$2 billion in savings from the mergers and Local Government Minister Paul Toole said land sales would have to go through public consultations and receive the planning minister's approval.

“If given the opportunity, developers would sell their own mother to get their hands on our public land,” said Ryde Mayor Jerome Laxale, who wants his council’s key properties retained but concedes the matter may be out of his hands.



*Any talk of selling Waverley council chambers is premature, mayor Sally Betts says.*

With water views, Ryde Council’s Meadowbank operations centre and its civic centre are worth in excess of \$50 million and could be considered for sale if Ryde merges with Hunters Hill and Lane Cove.

Parts of Woollahra Council’s \$700 million land and property portfolio, much of it overlooking the harbour, are also high on developers’ wishlists as the council merges with Waverley and Randwick.

Sources suggest a new town hall for the eastern suburbs super council is being planned at Bondi’s Spring Street, making the three existing councils’ chambers potentially redundant.

Waverley’s Bondi Road chambers are worth at least \$10 million, according to Kohler Bird Valuers’ principal David Bird. Precise values would depend on any rezoning, height limits and building densities.

Waverley Mayor Sally Betts said it was “premature” to consider council buildings sales but did not rule out the prospect: “Any future council will need to consider the best use of the council’s resources on behalf of the community at that time.”

Woollahra’s harbourside chambers would be worth up to \$40 million if rezoned for residential use and neighbouring St Brigids library would also be valuable. Ms Betts described Woollahra’s chambers as “irreplaceable”.



*Randwick council. Picture: John Appleyard      Hunters Hill council chambers.*

“Some of the sites are simply magnificent and would get snapped up instantly,” said one real estate agent, who declined to be named.

Randwick’s town hall and chambers are worth over \$50 million but a spokesman said the heritage-listed town hall would “never be sold and would continue to be used as civic meeting and venue spaces regardless of where council meetings are held”.

There is a significant upside from any sales — with the property gold mine’s proceeds boosting public coffers and ploughed into new facilities.

Hunters Hill Council’s historic town hall has been valued at up to \$20 million but its heritage status may afford it some protection.

However, Phil Jenkyn, co-convenor of Save Hunters Hill Municipality Coalition highlighted the impact the loss of the council’s historic buildings would have for the community.

“There is a real risk if there is a forced amalgamation that the Town Hall, Fairland Hall and other assets within Hunters Hill could be sold, an area of high land values.”

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/council-amalgamations-could-spark-sydneys-biggest-land-grab/news-story/33c0ba98e807b937bdb5b305d8d7451e>



*Water views: Ryde Council Chambers.*