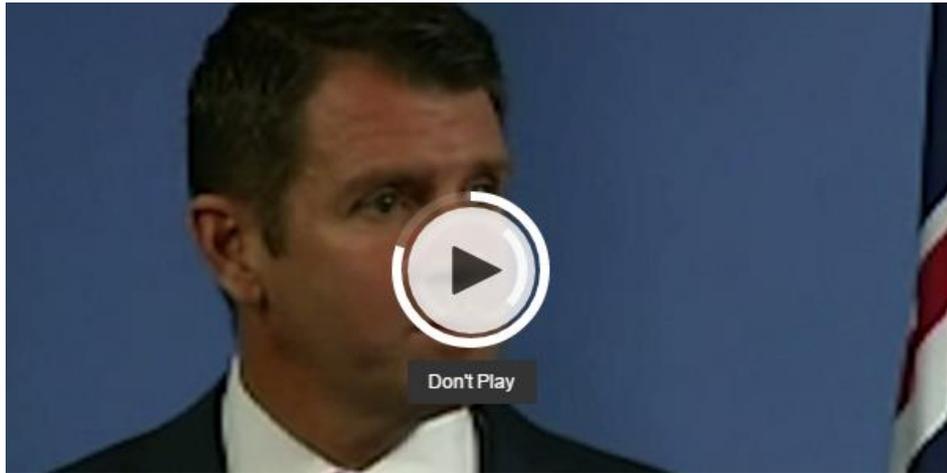


Councils make fresh attempts to fight Premier Mike Baird's council reform plan

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Melanie Kembrey
Journalist



NSW GOVERNMENT PROMISES NO JOB LOSSES IN MERGER

NSW Premier Mike Baird and the State Member for Bathurst Paul Toole promise no rate hikes or job losses in the merging of smaller councils. (Vision courtesy ABC New 24)

- Woollahra to take NSW government to court over amalgamations
- Mike Baird sets out the path to fewer councils

The attempt to overhaul local government in NSW is becoming increasingly tumultuous, with councils making last-minute moves to railroad the merger process.

Kogarah, Botany and Rockdale councils are the latest to try to disrupt the states government's reform agenda, all supporting the submission of alternative mergers to the ones proposed for them.

The move comes as Woollahra Council has threatened to take legal action against Local Government Minister Paul Toole if plans to force it to merge are not dropped within seven days.

Under the government's bid to slash Sydney's councils from 43 to 25, Kogarah was to merge with Hurstville and Botany Bay with Rockdale.

But in a last-ditch effort to keep the St George area united, Rockdale and Kogarah councillors are now trying to use the Section 218E "loophole" in the Local Government Act to remain together and merge with Hurstville.

"We share common infrastructure, a vibrant multi-national demographic and in the past to this very day, we maintain local working relationships with both Kogarah and Hurstville councils on regional issues, like our waste and garbage contracts," a Rockdale Council spokesman said.



Local Government Minister Paul Toole says any council-initiated proposals may not be considered at the same time as the others. Photo: Peter Rae

Separately, Botany Bay wants to use the same clause to attempt to remain a standalone council with an expanded boundary that takes in chunks of Randwick and the City of Sydney.

Warringah Council drew attention to the 218E clause late last month, when it was successful in having a single Northern Beaches Council put back on the table, despite the government having previously dismissed it.

Section 218E allows councils to submit their own merger proposals to the Local Government Minister. It also enables voters in an electorate to lodge a proposal that applies to the whole of one or more areas, if at least 10 per cent are supportive.

Submissions on the government's original merger proposals have closed. Delegates appointed by the Office of Local Government will now prepare reports on them for the Boundaries Commission.

Local Government Minister Paul Toole has foreshadowed that any council-initiated proposals submitted after Warringah's would probably not be examined with the current crop of mergers.

"The timeframe for consideration of additional proposals would be a matter for the Chief Executive of the Office of Local Government or his delegate, and then the Boundaries Commission," Mr Toole said.

"It may be likely that consideration of any further proposals may occur subsequent to the proposals under current consideration."

This could mean that the Boundaries Commission would deliver its findings on the current merger proposals, before a new round of public inquiries into council-initiated merger proposals then occurs.

In a letter sent to all mayors, the minister said that the government intended to keep its commitment of commencing any new local government areas covered by the original merger proposals by the middle of 2016.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/councils-make-fresh-attempts-to-fight-premier-mike-bairds-council-reform-plan-20160308-gndm3i.html>