

NSW government to walk away from battle over council mergers

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JASON TIN and ANDREW CLENNELL



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PREMIER Gladys Berejiklian has announced the NSW government will walk away from a legal fight over the state government's controversial council merger plan.

The Daily Telegraph has confirmed the government will not proceed with the forced mergers of those councils currently battling the decree in the courts.

In a statement released by Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton today, she says: “Due to the protracted nature of current legal challenges and the uncertainty this is causing taxpayers, those council amalgamations currently before the courts will not proceed.”



The Premier defended the government’s latest backflip, saying it was the right thing to do. Picture: Paul Miller

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“I believe in the government’s policy position,” Ms Berejiklian said.

“There’s no doubt implementation could’ve been better, I’ll say that from the outset.

“But I’m also someone who went to a by-election on this policy knowing that the local economy was not supportive of this decision.”

Ms Berejiklian said it was up to councils themselves to work out how to handle costs associated with their challenges.

“If councils have taken up the decision to go to court on the behalf of ratepayers, that’s a matter for them, it’s not my problem.”

The Premier said she would have still preferred to proceed with the mergers.

“This is a decision that’s weighed heavily on the government and if I’d had my way, we would’ve seen those merge proposals move forward,” she said.



Ms Berejiklian tried to frame the issue as a matter of “conscience”, saying the court processes had stretched on “much longer” than the state had anticipated.

“I am taking this decision because it’s providing certainty for communities,” she said.

“How could we in good conscience say to communities ‘Go to the poll on September 9, but there’s a risk you might not end up with who you voted for’.”

She also declared: “I’m someone who does not have an ego. I will make decisions that are in the best interests of the community, even if it means sometimes as leader you do have to take responsibility.

“That’s what leaders do, they step up, determine what is in the best interests of their community and move forward.”



Woollahra Council was fighting a merger with Waverley and Randwick. Picture: Justin Lloyd

Former Leichhardt mayor Darcy Byrne, is running for Labor for the position of mayor of the Inner West council, which Leichhardt was merged into.

“The whole amalgamation process has been a partisan rort by the Liberal Party,” he said.

“People in non-Liberal seats have been forcibly amalgamated and had their democracy abolished while wealthy, blue ribbon areas are now protected.

“This shows yet again why we need an election now and to urgently restore the voices of local residents.”

Meanwhile, the Property Council blasted the government, calling today a “disappointing day for NSW”.

“Eighteen months after a bold and forward-looking announcement from Premier Baird the wheels have fallen off - the government has abandoned what it knows is the right thing to do in favour of the perceived short-term political benefits,” Property Council NSW executive director Jane Fitzgerald said.

“Reform has already created stronger, larger councils that are more financially sustainable, more professional and capable of better strategic thinking to meet the challenges of a growing population needing jobs, infrastructure and local services.

“And, more importantly, better outcomes are already being delivered – costs have been cut, services are better and more difficult challenges are being met.”

This comes as The Daily Telegraph overheard a senior adviser to the Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton coaching the MP on how to respond to criticism on the merger backflip.

The adviser, role-playing as the press pack while riding a crowded commuter train into the city this morning, was heard to challenge Ms Upton, putting her through her paces with this pointed missive: “Did you and the Premier lie to us?”

He insisted Ms Upton stress to the media in today’s press conference that the government did not want the spectre of council mergers hanging over the forthcoming September local government elections.

[Woollahra mayor Toni Zeltzer](#) said it was a “major win for democracy”.

“We have been vindicated,” Cr Zeltzer said. “We have wasted four years of council time but finally sense have prevailed.

“It’s a major win for democracy.”

The decision comes weeks before the local government elections.

<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/nsw-government-expected-to-walk-away-from-legal-battle-over-council-mergers/news-story/8e08cad5426dc30b4dc2a138b44a101>