

Premier cancels 14 council mergers

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BY OUR CIVIC ROUNDSMAN

In a massive victory for People Power, the proposed forced mergers of Ryde, Hunters Hill and Lane Cove Councils were called off by Premier Gladys Berejiklian on Thursday.



Phil Jenkyn Save Hunters Hill Opposition Leader Luke Foley Premier Gladys Berejiklian

The backflip includes the proposed forced merger of Canada Bay with Burwood and Strathfield.

It does not save councils already forced to merge into a mega council, including neighbouring Leichhardt, forced to merge with Ashfield and Marrickville and parts of Epping merged into Parramatta.

In her announcement on the run in Martin Place, Ms Berejiklian hit out at local councils – including Hunters Hill – which have been fighting the forced mergers in court.

“It has become increasingly clear that certain councils were happy to continue lengthy and costly legal proceedings,” Ms Berejiklian said.

“That is why we are drawing a line under this issue today and ending the uncertainty.”

Save Hunters Hill Coalition spokesman Phil Jenkyn OAM warned that uncertainty remained, despite Thursday’s welcome announcement.

“We still face the risk that the Liberal Party will try to elect young Liberals on our three local councils on September 9 and if they win power could meet together and agree to voluntarily merge the councils,” he said.

“Nor is there anything to stop Gladys Berejiklian pursuing these hugely unpopular mergers once the council elections are over.

“She must legislate to stop the mergers in parliament and not just make a quick announcement to the media while hiding behind a pole in Martin Place.”

Opposition Leader Luke Foley said the Premier had been forced to make the backflip, to save the Liberal Party.

“The Liberal powerbrokers have told Gladys Berejiklian they’ll cop a hiding at the September 9 local government elections over this, so they’d better cut and run now,” Mr Foley said.

“This is not just the case of a bad policy, it is the case of a bad government.

“And it is too little, too late and many communities have been left with second rate councils, forcibly merged.

“If this government has any decency at all, it will allow plebiscites in those areas that have been forced to merge already.”



Mayor Richard Quinn



Mayor Deborah Hutchens



Mayor Bill Pickering

Hunters Hill Mayor Richard Quinn (Ind) said that while the decision is welcome, local residents should not have been put through years of uncertainty.

“Many lives have been affected, there have been upheavals for families and a lot of time and effort put into this fight.”

Mayor Quinn has not ruled out Hunters Hill going ahead with an opinion poll on a forced merger at the September 9 election.

Lane Cove Mayor Deborah Hutchens (Lib) opposed the forced merger from the outset and said she is delighted by Thursday’s announcement.

“From the very outset, at that rally in Martin Place we’ve said that Lane Cove is fit for the future, well governed, well managed, financially sound and able to deliver important projects for our ratepayers,” she said.

Despite claiming the forced mergers were “inevitable” and vowing to lead Ryde to a prestigious position on a mega council, City of Ryde Mayor Colonel Bill Pickering (Lib) also welcomed Thursday’s announcement.

“The community have suffered from this long and divisive campaign to support of our right to stand alone,” he said.

“Eighty per cent of Ryde residents opposed the forced amalgamation and made it quite clear that they want local representation on local matters and that bigger is not necessarily better.”

In Canada Bay, Liberal Mayor Helen McCaffery also welcomed the backflip and stressed that a Price Waterhouse Coopers independent audit found that the City of

Canada Bay exceeds industry benchmarks in all six of the State Government's 'Fit for the Future' Key Performance Indicators.

"We have had strong cohesive governance for a long time and are in a strong financial position," Mayor McCaffrey said.

"The City of Canada Bay is a wonderful area with strong community spirit so I am very pleased the City of Canada Bay will continue."



Victor Dominello MP



Anthony Roberts MP



Trent Zimmerman MP

Ratepayers across the four local government communities have praised *The Weekly Times* for its fight to save local democracy, as summed up by Mr Jenkyn who said this newspaper had fought in the front line.

"On behalf of our communities I have to say that the campaign by *The Weekly Times* has been unsurpassed in the history of local democracy in New South Wales," he said.

"Together with broadcaster Alan Jones, *The Weekly Times* has fought this from day one and week after week with exclusive on the spot news coverage and hard hitting, damning editorials.

"Hunters Hill especially owes *The Weekly Times* a great debt of gratitude, in this, our most important fight of all.

"People Power has won an astonishing victory."

Unlike Ryde MP Victor Dominello (Lib) and Lane Cove MP Anthony Roberts (Lib), North Sydney MP Trent Zimmerman (Lib) opposed the forced merger of local councils from the outset.

"I have consistently opposed forced Council amalgamations as the proposed enlarged Councils would erode their role in our local communities," he said. "The uncertainty it was causing for residents was unsustainable.

"I want to acknowledge the work of our local mayors and councillors in putting the case against amalgamations so forcefully and the many community groups and residents who were part of the campaign."

Local Government NSW President Keith Rhoades welcomed the Premier's announcement but said more needs to be done.

“We need to address the very real financial sustainability issues councils face such as fixing the rating system, ending cost-shifting and getting a better share of tax revenue to support the local services communities depend on every day, he said.

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