

Backlash to forced council amalgamations unites suburbs big and small

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Councils from across NSW's have continued to unite in their fight against the Baird Government's forced amalgamations, which they say is a "threat to their local communities".



Mayor of Woollahra Toni Zeltzer said she met with councils from across NSW because mergers could be "the beginning of the end" for smaller councils.

"I wanted to extend Woollahra's hand of friendship and support to other councils in this struggle against forced mergers," she told City Hub.

"Employment of council staff in small communities is one of the drivers of the local economies and the loss of council jobs through mergers will be the beginning of the end for many country towns," she said.

Mayor Zeltzer met with the other mayors last month at the Woollahra Council Chambers.

Under the Baird government's plans, the number of Sydney councils would be slashed from 43 to 25 and regional councils cut from 109 to 87, to save up to \$2 billion over 20 years.

A variety of councils from across NSW have taken or are planning to take legal action against the NSW government to stop amalgamations, including Botany Bay, Woollahra, Kiama and Walcha councils.

Ms Zeltzer, a Liberal mayor, said it was the "biggest threat to local democracy" she had seen in her time as a councillor.

Clr. Zeltzer has previously said the forced amalgamation process had “shaken her Liberal values to the core”.

The comments echo what the Save Our Council Coalition, known as SOCC, said has been councils “big and small banding together” to challenge the amalgamations.

SOCC spokesperson Tom Sherlock, also a Mosman Councillor, said he was in awe of the community resolve shown by rural and regional councils uniting with city councils.

“This is a marvellous aspect of what has been an appalling process,” he told city hub.

“Councils across NSW realise how important community is.”

“Council is the most important thing to maintain a sense of community.”

Mr Sherlock said the amalgamations will be a hot-button issue for the upcoming federal election, widely tipped for July 2.

“It’s the Liberal party in NSW doing the amalgamations. It will definitely play a role,” he said.

“Turnbull can’t afford to ignore the issue.”

“It has become a de-facto referendum on council amalgamations.”

The NSW government has said the reforms will lead to stronger councils, improve performance and “substantial savings” for local communities.

“Sydney has 41 councils while Brisbane gets by with one,” a spokesperson for Minister for Local Government Paul Toole told City Hub.

“The Government has put forward proposals that would reduce the number of councils in Sydney to 25.”

“Proposals have been developed to achieve as much consensus as possible.”

Yet the NSW Government’s claim that council amalgamations will lead to lower rates and improve service quality are “not based in reality”, according to a local government expert.

Professor Brian Dollery, from the University of New England, has extensively studied previous council mergers and found no difference between merged and unmerged councils – particularly on financial performance.

“Some merged councils even performed much worse,” he told City Hub.

Mr. Dollery said “quality of management” was the driving factor behind improved performance, not size as has been put forward by the Baird government.

He dismissed the Baird government’s claim that cost savings would be passed on to ratepayers.

“Mike Baird’s ideology has been that bigger is better, and that’s not correct,” he said.

Minister Toole’s spokesperson said Professor Dollery’s comments came as no surprise.

“Professor Dollery is a known opponent of mergers and often used by councils to justify a no-change position,” he said.

The NSW Government said no decision has been made to date on any merger proposals.

“The Government is aiming to make a decision on proposals currently under consideration mid-year,” the spokesperson said.

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