

Baird's council mergers: Barnaby Joyce in ring as regions fight plans

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Walcha Mayor Janelle Archdale and community activist George Spring in Walcha in northern of NSW. 'You will do whatever it takes.' Picture: Lindsay Moller

Three regional councils will today mount a legal challenge to the NSW government's forced amalgamation plans, with the backing of Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce.

Walcha Council, in the state's north, which falls in Mr Joyce's electorate, and Oberon Council in the NSW central tablelands will petition the state's Land and Environment Court to declare invalid the forced merger process. They are joined by Cabonne Council in NSW's central west.

The amalgamation plan championed by Premier Mike Baird is causing rifts between state and federal National MPs and threatens to cause tensions within the federal leadership.

Mr Joyce, the federal Nationals leader who faces a fierce challenge from high-profile independent Tony Windsor for his seat of New England, has taken up the cause on behalf of constituents deeply opposed to the mergers. He has met with Mr Baird and his deputy Troy Grant, attended public rallies in Walcha and written to NSW Minister for Local Government Paul Toole.

Mr Toole, a Nationals MP, represents the state seat of Bathurst, which takes in Oberon.

“I’ve made my views abundantly clear that a place such as Walcha, which is financially viable, which is geographically distinct, which is socially distinct ... shouldn’t be forced to amalgamate,” Mr Joyce said.

Malcolm Turnbull has so far declined to comment on the issue, and yesterday his office did not respond to questions from *The Australian*. This is despite facing a backlash in his electorate of Wentworth, with Woollahra Council in his eastern suburbs seat launching a legal challenge to the amalgamations. The litigation could also become a vehicle to settle old political scores. Peter King, the former Liberal member for Wentworth, who lost the seat in a bitter preselection fight to Mr Turnbull, is representing the regional councils in their legal battle.

The Land and Environment Court action will piggyback on Woollahra’s legal challenge, but also raises separate legal issues.

Walcha Mayor Janelle Archdale said the rural community relied on council to ensure delivery of essential services including aged-care services, childcare, medical facilities and vehicle inspections. She said the council was financially sound, having posted a \$1.2 million surplus last financial year.

Cattle farmer George Spring said litigation did not come naturally to country people. “However, when you are faced with an arrogant NSW government, a process that is flawed, and you are protecting your community, you will look at all options and do whatever it takes,” he said.

Oberon Mayor Kathy Sajowitz said anger in her area could spill into the looming federal election because it was the first opportunity residents would have to voice their displeasure. “The feeling in Oberon against the National Party is vitriolic in places,” she said.

Mr King said: “Rural citizens and their councils are concerned that, firstly, the loss of local services, secondly, the loss of their local voice and, thirdly, their desire to maintain their community infrastructure have not been properly regarded and the decisions that have been taken have been a *fait accompli*.”

Cabonne Mayor Ian Gosper said residents feared the shire’s tiny villages would not survive.

The Baird government is proposing to slash the number of Sydney councils from 43 to 25 and regional councils cut from 109 to 87, to save up to \$2 billion over 20 years.

COMMENTS

Harry

Nothing has been achieved up here in Queensland by amalgamation. It was Beattie’s ego that got the better of him another example 'look at me'.

Gayle

Baird is doing to State Government what Turnbull is doing to Federal Government, both have no concern for what the constituents want, it is all about what they want, both are in for a shock come the election.