

Last round before powers stripped

Lisa Visentin

Councils in Sydney and Wollongong will decide their final round of significant development applications this month before their powers are stripped and handed to independent panels.

From March 1, Independent Hearing and Assessment Panels, or IHAPs, will decide development applications valued between \$5 million and \$30 million for all Sydney councils and Wollongong City Council.

The panels will also decide applications which have a conflict of interest with council, or have received 10 or more objections from the community, or are deemed to have a higher risk of corruption.

The panels have been justified by the Berejiklian government as a transparency measure, designed to guard against corruption in the

development approval process. But the move has been met with resistance from some councils, including several in Liberal heartland electorates.

Local Government NSW president Linda Scott, who also serves as a Labor councillor at the City of Sydney, criticised the panels as

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Linda Scott, Local Government NSW

adding a layer of bureaucracy without the accountability afforded by directly elected representatives.

"Democratically elected councils should be able to determine whether the panel option is the right choice for their area and

whether there are real benefits to the community," Cr Scott said.

She said the panels were expected to cost each council about \$100,000, according to estimates by the Department of Planning. "This means less

funding for local parks, childcare centres and libraries in local communities," she said.

Liberal mayors Philip Ruddock and Michelle Byrne, who lead Hornsby council and the Hills Shire council respectively,

have been critical of IHAPs. Cr Byrne last week called on Planning Minister Anthony Roberts to scrap the panels, saying it was a "terrible system".

She called on other Sydney councils "to come together to protest this appalling policy".

Cr Ruddock has voiced concerns the council "had little say over the representation on the panel" despite ratepayers being forced to cover the costs of the representatives.

The panels will be comprised of four members, with three selected from a pool of expert candidates pre-approved by the planning minister. The fourth member is a community representative appointed by the council.

Mr Roberts has previously called IHAPs a way to "bring transparency, integrity and a high degree of probity to the development application assessment process."

