

Why didn't Leichhardt Council fight the Merger?

posted by JOHN LOZANO
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In 2016 on the eve of amalgamation two motions were tabled at Leichhardt Council. One expressing support for Woollahra Council's legal challenge to their forced merger. The other seeking to join them. *The motions were lost.*



“The case for mergers never stacked up. That’s why communities across the inner west did not want to merge, and why I voted in favour of joining other inner-city councils by challenging our proposed merger in the courts,” said independent councillor John Stamolis.

When council mergers rolled out across NSW two stood out more than others.

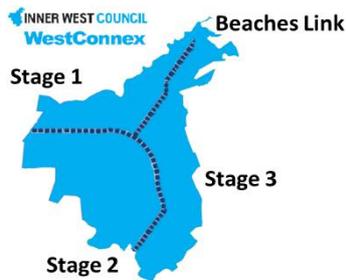
[Mid Coast \(Gloucester, Great Lakes and Greater Taree\)](#)

These communities opposed coal seam gas. Their punishment? Appointment of former Nationals MP John Harcourt Turner as their administrator. The Chairman of the Community Consultative Committee for Whitehaven Coal – *ouch....*

[Inner West \(Leichhardt, Marrickville, Ashfield\)](#)

These communities opposed Westconnex. Their punishment? The appointment of a former director of the NSW Department of Planning as their administrator. That’s the department that approved Westconnex, despite strong resistance from our former councils – *nice....*

Oh, and did I mention that both of these administrators advised the NSW Government on how to implement council amalgamations? I think the proposal was called Amalgamation for Dummies.



Check out how neatly the Westconnex route fits within the inner west council boundaries.

The administrator ensured council's voice was muffled. A few statements, with the adjective 'strongly' inserted, were the best our new 'council' would muster.

But why didn't we fight the merger? Other councils did.

We wouldn't have been alone. We could've leveraged costs, resources, even legal arguments. The motion was on the table. The community in the gallery yelled in unison **"YES! FIGHT! YES!"**

(Extract from Leichhardt Council minutes 22 March 2016)

ITEM 7.3 LEGAL CHALLENGE TO FORCED COUNCIL AMALGAMATIONS

"That Council contact Woollahra Council and seek to join their pending court action against forced amalgamations." **(Channells/ Porteous)**

These voted in favour. These listened to the community.

FOR: Cr Rochelle Porteous, Cr Craig Channells, Cr Michele McKenzie, Cr John Stamolis

But two parties, often ideologically opposed, did not. The Liberal Party and the Labor Party voted in the interests of themselves and against the wishes of the community.

AGAINST: Cr John Jobling, Cr Tony Costantino, Cr Darcy Byrne, Cr Simon Emsley, Cr Linda Kelly, Cr Frank Breen

"Instead of challenging the merger, our Liberal and Labor Councillors teamed up to force the merger upon us," recalls Stamolis.

A few months before, Labor mayors Darcy Byrne (Leichhardt), Sam Iskandar (Marrickville) and Lucille McKenna (Ashfield) met with Local Government Minister Paul Toole, who gave undertakings he would take the proposed merger to the

Boundaries Commission and the councils would receive the \$25 million carrot on offer to councils who accept a merger, reported the Inner West Courier on 11 November 2015.



Byrne said the mayors had expressed their disappointment at the process, but they had received legal advice that the government could suspend councillors and appoint administrators which meant forced mergers could go ahead, continued the local tabloid.

Afraid they would be dismissed, that night they chose to comply. They voted NO to challenge the merger.

How could their legal advice have been so different to other councils?

Their fears came true – karma perhaps. They were sacked, an administrator appointed, and we were amalgamated. *Oh, the injustice - these Liberals can't be trusted* - they would proclaim.

Injustice indeed. Injustice for our community....

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