

Two councils to hold referendums on mergers at September elections

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Two Sydney councils in traditional Liberal heartland will use council elections to conduct a referendum on council mergers, adding to mounting pressure on the Berejiklian government over the controversial policy.



Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton says the government remains committed to the remaining mergers, which have been delayed due to legal action. Photo: Supplied

Alongside electing councillors, ratepayers in Hunters Hill and Lane Cove will be asked if they support the state government's proposed merger in a separate poll at the September council elections.

It comes as some Sydney mayors foreshadow scaled-back elections and difficulty in attracting quality candidates due to the ongoing uncertainty over the future of their councils.

The referendums will be the first time entire communities have been polled on their views on council mergers, more than a year after the then-Baird government rolled out the policy in May 2016.

Hunters Hill mayor Richard Quinn said he expected the result would vindicate the council's decision to fight the merger through the courts.

"We're simply asking the question we believe the government should have asked from the beginning," he said. "I believe it will show our community is not in favour of amalgamation."

Cr Quinn said 80 per cent of written submissions in response to the government's merger proposal were opposed to the merger.

Lane Cove Liberal councillor Scott Bennison, who put forward the successful motion for the council to hold the poll, justified his decision to oppose Liberal state government policy in his belief the community was better served by a standalone council.

"Internally I get comments from Liberal colleagues. But why should I support something that's fundamentally flawed?" he said. "As a Liberal party member I chose to support my community."

The motion, which was opposed by three Liberal councillors, including mayor Deborah Hutchens, also included the proviso that, if residents voted in support of the merger, the council would immediately withdraw its legal action.

Hunters Hill and Lane Cove councils were among numerous councils across NSW that immediately launched legal action against the mergers, delaying the process and creating a long-running political headache for the government.

Following Premier Gladys Berejiklian's decision in February to abandon the remaining mergers in rural and regional NSW, the government is still fighting six Sydney councils through the courts, which has delayed the merger of 14 councils.

Due to statutory requirements, [the 14 councils will each hold elections in September](#), under the looming threat they could be abolished at any moment should the legal action fail.

Burwood mayor John Faker, who had helmed the council for 17 years, said the prospect that councillors might only serve weeks or months of their four-year term was making it difficult to find candidates.

"The biggest problem is getting young candidates, and intelligent people to run on tickets," he said.

"I can't see us having a really big campaign. If anything it might be an existing ticket and, when the new merged council happens, then you look at renewal."

Mosman mayor Peter Abelson, who decided against standing again after 13 years on the council, said candidates often spent up to \$20,000, and invested weeks on their election campaigns.

"I think it will affect some people's decision [to run for election]," he said. "It's a demanding thing to do, to run for election."

Cr Quinn said he was yet to decide whether or not to run again but said he "would be most surprised if it doesn't dissuade other candidates".

"Why would they bother if there's so much uncertainty?" he said.

Local Government Minister Gabrielle Upton has repeatedly affirmed the government's commitment to the remaining mergers, citing the "clear benefits it will have for the local communities".

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