

Kiama says no to council amalgamations

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Result should send "a clear message to the government": Kiama Mayor Brian Petschler. Photo: Albey Bond

In the first electoral test of the controversial plan for council amalgamation, NSW south coast voters have joined a growing backlash against the State Government's scheme.

The state electoral commission has reported that 95.5 per cent of Kiama voters who took part in a voluntary referendum said 'no' to the amalgamation of Kiama and Shoalhaven councils. Of 16,829 eligible voters, just under half turned up to vote on Saturday.

Kiama Mayor Brian Petschler said it was an "excellent result given the voluntary nature of the poll". He said the result sent a "clear message to the NSW Government that it should not proceed with this forced amalgamation" with Shoalhaven City Council.

"We had asked the state government to undertake this poll. It didn't, so we commissioned it ourselves with the support of our community," Cr Petschler said.

"The community feeling is overwhelmingly against this proposal."

Keep Kiama Council Local Committee chairman Rob McKinnon said Kiama is located in the vulnerable Liberal-held federal seat of Gilmore.

"The Federal Government should also take note of this result. People feel very strongly about this issue and unfortunately for Malcolm Turnbull he is next cab off the rank," Mr McKinnon said.

NSW Greens MP and local government spokesman David Shoebridge said the result of the plebiscite was a credit to Kiama Municipal Council and local campaigners who have "stared down" the Baird government.

He said they had done "what any responsible government should do, ask their residents".



Kiama community says no to council amalgamations. Photo: Supplied

"This makes it politically impossible for Mike Baird to push on with his forced amalgamation plan for Kiama," Mr Shoebridge said.

"With more and more councils mounting legal challenges, this weekend's referendum adds to a growing state-wide revolt against forced amalgamations and in support of genuinely local and responsible councils."

The rebellion over forced council amalgamations has spread from Sydney's northern and Eastern suburbs to the bush, including to Minister for Local Government Paul Toole's own seat.

Several small rural councils have banded together to take legal action against their mergers. Oberon, which is part of Mr Toole's seat of Bathurst, is challenging its proposed merger with Bathurst. Two other small councils – Walcha and Carbonne – are also part of the challenge, which is expected to run in the Land and Environment Court.

Ku-ring-gai Council has been in the Supreme Court asking for the public release of a report on its merger with Hornsby.

Woollahra Council has also challenged its merger with Waverley and Randwick in the Land and Environment Court.

Hunters Hill and Mosman are also taking legal action and several smaller regional councils are also threatening to start cases. The strength of those will hinge on whether Woollahra council wins its case, with a decision expected soon.

A spokeswoman Mr Toole said the State Government has conducted an extensive public consultation process which will inform final decisions.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/kiama-says-no-to-council-amalgamations-20160507-gop177.html>