

NSW council amalgamations: Mayors fight to claw back court dollars after backflip on merger

ABC News 27 Jul 2017
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PHOTO: *After an 18-month battle, councils opposing the merger will not be forced to amalgamate. (ABC News)*

They may have won the battle to stop the merger of their councils, but the victors are now looking get back the sizeable costs spent fighting the NSW Government, and to stop them being able to try it again.

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"This is not over yet," the spokesman for Save Our Councils (SOC) Phil Jenkyn said.

"No government will ever take on the community again like this disgraced government has over the last two years: Baird and Berejiklian. They will, in the history books, be forever condemned."

He and other leaders opposing the amalgamations were celebratory but already pitching the new battle grounds:

- Claiming back court costs from the State Government
- Proposing the de-amalgamation of the already merged councils
- New legislations that council would not be able to be forced into merging in the future.

Govt's 'B-Grade gymnast' backflip



PHOTO: Greens MP David Shoebridge (in a suit) with merger protesters in 2015. (ABC News: Sarah Gerathy)

Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced in February her government would scrap forced mergers for the country councils fighting back.

Today, she announced the same concession for the metropolitan councils of Mosman, Willoughby, North Sydney, Lane Cove, Hunters Hill, Ryde, Strathfield, Canada Bay, Burwood, Ashfield, Ku-ring-gai, Hornsby, Woollahra, Randwick and Waverley.

Greens MP David Shoebridge said he would be pushing for the legislation to be changed, and for councils to get money back from their protracted fights.

Mr Shoebridge described the Government's change of policy as another "backflip", likening it to their policies on greyhounds.

"Like some B-grade gymnast they've put another back flip together on local councils."

"This has been forced up on them by a united campaign."

Labor's Peter Primrose said: "The war will continue."

Mr Primrose said the only reason the Liberal and National parties had sidelined the difficult amalgamations was so they could smooth their path for the next state election and not because they cared for the community.

Councils want their costs back

"This is a great day for local democracy, a great day," Councillor Toni Zeltzer, Mayor of Woollahra Council said.

"Our community strongly opposed the mergers. There were good reasons and we fought the fight on their behalf," she told a small crowd, who cheered for the day's success.

"This is a very pleasing decision."



PHOTO: *In February, the Premier said she would leave the opposing country councils unmerged.* (ABC: Melanie Pearce)

Woollahra was a powerful player in the fight against the NSW Government's forced merger, with its claim making its way to the High Court in Canberra.

Woollahra and another council with a prestigious Sydney postcode, Hunters Hill, had sometimes been considered at an unfair advantage in fighting their mergers as relatively wealthy councils.

Hunters Hill Mayor Richard Quinn said his council had spent nearly \$300,000 fighting forced amalgamation and he would be seeking those legal costs back from the State Government.

Councillor Quinn said every council across the state spent money for possible mergers, which was an unwelcome distraction from local governance.

He said Hunters Hill did not run at an unfair advantage over wealth.

"I would suggest there are many communities across NSW that could have, if they were resolute enough, have pursued the same course of action as we have," he said.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-27/after-nsw-council-merger-backflip-mayors-try-to-get-money-back/8749462>