

Supreme Court forces NSW government to hand over council merger report

GovernmentNews April 19, 2016
Marie Sansom



What's up Skip? Hopping mad over mergers.

Ku-ring-gai Council, on Sydney's leafy North Shore, has forced the Baird government to hand over a report on its proposed merger with Hornsby Council, with Mayor Cheryl Szatow pronouncing the report "superficial and misleading" and a foregone conclusion.

Councils were left hopping mad over NSW Local Government Minister Paul Toole's decision to delay releasing delegates' reports on council mergers until after delivering his verdict on which councils should merge.

Undeterred, Ku-ring-gai Council took its case to the Land and Environment Court and then to the Supreme Court and succeeded in liberating the report from the government's grasp.

Ms Szatow blowtorched the report by delegate Garry West, saying the report – and the merger – was a done deal from the get go. The report went to the Boundaries Commission and Mr Toole in March.

There are 45 merger proposals on the table and the delegates' reports were submitted after a series of public inquiries into the mergers.

Delegates also used written submissions and supporting documents, including a KPMG report on the economic rationale for mergers that has only partially been made public.

Mr West recommended that “the proposal as submitted should proceed to implementation”, despite 83 per cent of the council’s residents strongly opposing the merger with Hornsby Council during the public inquiry, a contradiction that Ms Szatow said was “an outrageous abuse of government power.”

The mayor believed that Mr West blindly accepted the state government’s financial claims about the merger without testing them.

Mr West’s report also alleged that the council had manipulated residents’ public inquiry submissions by using form letters but the council has denied this.

Ms Szatow said the report did “nothing to dispel the cynicism surrounding the whole merger process that is being stage managed by the Baird government.”

“We have had a procession of reports from IPART, KMPG and now the delegates either suppressed or dismissed by the Baird government so they can force communities into a corner from which there is no way out,” said Ms Szatow.

“This is a Premier and a government that has wasted millions and millions of dollars over the last four years pushing the merger process, when the outcome was already decided.”

Mayor Szatow said the delegate’s report was based on a “cookie-cutter template, designed to deliver the state government what it wants.”

“Premier Baird has never been interested in the community’s views on mergers. This is a state government that rules by decree, not democracy.”

She warned that Ku-ring-gai Council could cease to exist in “a matter of days.”

“We will keep fighting for our residents rights in the courts till we have exhausted every avenue, but I fear that our council is very close to the brink now.”

The NSW government plans to cut 40 of the state’s 152 councils, with Sydney’s councils being reduced from 43 to 25 and regional councils from 109 to 87.

<http://www.governmentnews.com.au/2016/04/supreme-court-forces-nsw-government-hand-council-merger-report/>