

# ‘Withdraw the merger, please’ – protests dog Baird’s visit

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*Rallying together: Dozens of protestors greeted Premier Mike Baird in Wollongong.*

Shellharbour Mayor Marianne Saliba seized the opportunity to publicly air her grievances with NSW Premier Mike Baird on Monday, confronting him twice as he visited Wollongong to speak at the Local Government NSW conference.

The outspoken Labor mayor was among a dozen councillors to question Mr Baird after his speech at the WIN Entertainment Centre, receiving a round of

applause as she asked him to overturn his plans for the Wollongong and Shellharbour merger.

“Will you now withdraw that merger proposal, given that you said you’re listening to communities?” Ms Saliba asked. “Well we’re talking, we do not want to merge and we want you to withdraw the merger, please.”

In answer, Mr Baird said he had already engaged with the community.

“I know that there are some good things that Shellharbour council is doing, I know there are some good things that Wollongong are doing –I think collectively you can do great things,” he said.

With official proceedings over, Ms Saliba followed Mr Baird backstage to a media conference, saying she needed to use the disabled toilet before coming out to heckle the Premier.



*Hijacked: Mayor Saliba followed media backstage to heckle Mr Baird. Pictures: Sylvia Liber.*

Security quickly bundled the Shellharbour representative into a nearby lift, but not before she shouted for journalists to “Ask him what he’s got for Shellharbour”.

In his conference address, Mr Baird told hundreds of councillors that 2016 had been “a difficult year”, with the fractured relationship between local and state

government evident in the half-hearted slow-clap delivered by some councillors as he walked to the stage.

“We’ve gone through a difficult period, but a period that I believe we’re going to come out stronger,” he said.

“Whether there be an opportunity to get to the position 100 per cent agreeing, I don’t think we’ll get there. But I certainly believe we’re united in trying to make the best possible difference to every ratepayer that we have the privilege to represent.”

He acknowledged the continuing legal challenges to his merger plans, but said he would “continue to deliver the benefits of what we’re seeing [from mergers]”, noting several councils had received new services and “greater capacity”.

Mr Baird also named-checked a handful of councillors he thought had done “incredible things”, with Wollongong Lord Mayor Gordon Bradbery getting a nod.



Meet and greet: Wollongong Lord Mayor and by-election candidate Gordon Bradbery met with Mr Baird on Monday.

# Protesters dog Baird's Wollongong visit



Protesters chanted “Shame Baird, shame” and “Listen to the people” ahead of Premier Mike Baird’s appearance at the WIN Entertainment Centre on Monday.

Among them was Shellharbour mayor Marianne Saliba, who said anti-merger protests were pinning their hopes on Mr Baird’s greyhound turnaround.

“He said last week that he hadn’t been listening to community and said he’s now listening, well I hope he’s listening loud and clear to the people of the Illawarra,” she said. Cr Saliba joined other council campaigners from around the state at the protest rally.

Dozens of hospital workers, who fear for their futures amid the government’s public-private partnership plans for Shellharbour Hospital, also rallied outside the conference.

“They’re wardspeople, they’re kitchen staff, we’ve got administration staff; they’re all the people that tend to go unnoticed in a hospital but are the framework,” Health Services Union Illawarra-Shoalhaven organiser Renee Cross said.

With placards and flags in hand, the employees made sure they didn't go unnoticed outside the WEC on Monday.

"They've lost trust in the government and for everything that it stands for," Ms Cross said.

NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association member Glenn Hayes, who works as a clinical nurse specialist at Shellharbour Hospital, said all staff wanted was consultation. "We're really disappointed because we weren't informed. Most of us found out via the media," Mr Hayes said.

"We would really like the Premier to actually talk to us and at least inform us what's going on.

"It was possible for the greyhounds' decision to be reverted, so I can't see why public health shouldn't be as important."

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