

**Submission  
No 177**

## **INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

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## SUBMISSION TO UPPER HOUSE INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

### Introduction

My submission relates to *Fit for the Future* submissions made by councils, and attendance at public meetings on this issue in Leichhardt, Marrickville and Hurlstone Park. My focus is on the element of proposed forced amalgamations of councils as might pertain to those in the inner west of Sydney – from Strathfield to Leichhardt.

I confine my submission comments mainly to the Marrickville LGA as that is where I live. Prior to moving to this area, I lived for many years in the Leichhardt LGA. I was an active and engaged resident in the latter, and continue to be so in the former. I have no friends or relatives among councillors or council staff and write solely as a resident and community member, having no business ownership in this municipality or anywhere else.

From my reading and attendance at meetings, I remain unclear as to the real basis for pushing single councils towards amalgamation. My own Council, Marrickville, is solvent and able to conduct almost all its functions according to the criteria formulated in the *Fit for the Future* document.

### Concerns/objections

I **object to compulsory** amalgamation of councils (also known as mergers) for the following reasons:

- Amalgamating councils into a much larger “super” council would almost certainly lead to chaotic policy-making and a superficial “one-size-fits- all” mentality that would not reflect the variability of current council boundaries with their differing histories, visions for future functioning, and ways of considering the built and natural environment.
- Risks to heritage areas from a one-size fits-all policy regarding the built environment. All around the inner west there is evidence of the rampant, unregulated development from the corrupt Hills Labor and Askin Liberal eras of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in streets in Summer Hill, Lewisham, Ashfield, Leichhardt, Marrickville and Petersham containing clusters of Victorian, Federation and Californian Bungalow houses, suddenly - without apparent planning rationale - emerge red-brick 2-8 storey unit blocks that ruin the integrity of the street/s. That was then. Now the stakes are far higher.

Due to current State planning legislation, developers already have undue powers to override Council LEPs and DCPs and as a consequence there are large, inappropriate tall or over-dense buildings appearing in otherwise low to medium rise areas which display little or no consideration for heritage, setback, amenity, aesthetic appeal and in particular, *traffic impacts*. The inner west should retain local councils that can attempt to enforce a vision that retains, as far as possible, the integrity of those areas.

- Loss of staff and associated expertise or experience. In larger merged councils, one could expect fewer staff to be employed but to cover a far wider area of diverse population areas and associated expectations and needs of the populace. While fewer employed staff might look “efficient” and “cost-saving” at first, this could also lead to loss of specific expertise gained over time – eg in planning knowledge for development applications, associated environmental knowledge, history of policy development in particular areas, and so on.
- Larger councils with fewer staff could also lead to a *reduction* in services that are not necessarily uniformly provided across all inner west councils. For example, Marrickville Council provides as part of its ratepayer base, the mowing of grass verges, a twice-yearly second-hand goods pick-up service, and a quarterly drop-off facility for E-waste and

chemicals. It is my understanding that some other inner west councils do not provide these services.

- If unfettered development of medium to high rise buildings were to be allowed without due regard to height, density and overshadowing restrictions around low-rise buildings and one-storey houses, it is highly possible that rooftop solar panels and solar hotwater systems would be overshadowed, thereby severely compromising free provision of daytime electricity, at great expense to homeowners and businesses. In turn, there would also be a negative impact on the climate as a major source of renewable, sustainable energy was impaired or removed.

To be clear, this is not a complete endorsement of Marrickville Council, with whom I have had disagreements over matters relating to my own situation and to wider community issues in general. But at present I have closer access to representation of my views and wishes for the common weal due to having three ward councillors whom I can approach direct, as well as Marrickville Council staff. I also have some input to various Council meetings either through councillors or by expressing my views, with others in the community on issues of common concern. A much larger council with fewer staff and fewer elected representatives would surely mean far less access for ordinary citizens who have no business or political sway with decision-makers.

Of course councils should regularly review their policies and practices to keep up to date with current environmental, demographic and financial changes. They should also seek to co-operate wherever possible with nearby councils to share functions and policies in common. As far as democratic processes go, local councils are the most accessible of the three levels of Australian government to ordinary citizens like me, despite having the most pressure put upon them by State governments (for example through cost shifting) and limits on their funding.

Furthermore, while "people have to live somewhere" (the refrain of the CEO of the Urban Taskforce, Chris Johnson, among others), this imperative must be tempered with the question "How should people live?". Mr Johnson has previously asserted that... *"It is too easy to exaggerate words like 'high rise' and 'win for developers' and raise concerns about change across the existing communities. Sydney....needs a hierarchy of heights and densities related to transport nodes and town centres to house future communities"*<sup>1</sup>. But **unless** there is genuine town planning that is

- transparent
- inclusive of voices other than those of big developers (and Chris Johnson)
- conducted over a reasonable time; and
- which takes into account the serious, lasting effects on our climate of tollways such as Westconnex and associated high-rise heat-emitting concrete; and
- which focuses on comprehensive, integrated, affordable public transport,

then merging local councils into much larger ones will not address these serious challenges and will only worsen them as the population grows.

## Summary

I believe that forcing unwilling local councils to merge into "super councils" with fewer controls over the built environment and the natural environment would:

- Encourage large and small-scale developers wanting access to more and more land – both vacant and occupied by low or medium-rise buildings - to have almost no checks on their intentions. That is, current barriers such as localised DCPs and LEPs would almost certainly

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<sup>1</sup> St George and Sutherland Shire Leader, Thursday February 12, 2015.

be removed, thereby enabling the State Government and developers from building what they want, where they want without due regard to history, local amenity, environmental considerations, scale, solar rooftop panels, and indeed, overall community wishes.

- Allow the immensely costly and wasteful, still largely secretive (to the public) tollway project known as Westconnex to have one less barrier in its way: the opinion and feedback from the relevant (ten) local inner west councils currently signed up to a Memorandum of Understanding with the WDA and other State Government departments.
- Pay even less regard to the imperative of addressing through a range of ameliorative policies and regulations, the impacts of rising carbon emissions in what is now acknowledged by the majority of world scientists as human-induced climate change. I have seen no acknowledgement or reference in the *Fit for the Future* process to how the effects of climate change on local communities might be addressed.

### **Conclusion**

I am forced to the conclusion that due to the dearth of hard evidence of economies of scale/savings/reduced costs to ratepayers, the real push for the compulsory merging of councils, most particularly in many areas of Sydney, is to return by stealth the failed attempt in 2011-12 by the then O'Farrell Liberal Government to introduce planning laws which would have seen large-scale, massive and often unwanted development across Sydney and in regional areas with very few checks and controls.

I am not aware that the Liberal/National Party promoted compulsory council mergers as a major platform prior to the last State election in March 2015 and wish to make it clear that I do not believe the State Government has a mandate to compel unwilling councils to merge into "super" councils.

### **Recommendation**

I call on this Inquiry to recommend, inter alia, that a referendum be held concurrently with local Council elections due to be held in September 2016. In this way, the Government will be in a position to clearly explain the rationale (all elements, rather than just economic/financial) and benefits for local communities, while respective local councils will be able to put their case for standing alone, if that is what they prefer. Those local councils which would prefer to amalgamate will also have the opportunity to put the case to their respective communities as to why a merger might work and the reasons for this.

**Adrienne Shilling**

4 July 2015