

Submission
No 167

INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Name suppressed
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Partially Confidential

SUBMISSION TO THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

TERMS OF REFERENCE

(e) the role of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (IPART) in reviewing the future of local government in New South Wales, assisted by a South Australian commercial consultant.

How can an organisation, whose Chairman is handpicked by the Premier, be independent? How can IPART's Chief Executive's performance be reviewed by the Chairman and the Chairman's performance by the Minister, the Premier of NSW.

It is noted that "The Tribunal may, by instrument of delegation delegate its functions and powers to specified persons, including individual Tribunal Members, Committees and staff."¹

I am personally concerned that IPART is not separate from the Government and its performance reviewed by our Premier.

(h) impact of forced mergers on council rates drawing from the recent Queensland experience and other forced amalgamation episodes – How can this be beneficial for the residents of Strathfield? How can you have a rating structure where the unique land size that is Strathfield be compared with the land size in say, Marrickville. Because the property prices are higher will this result in higher rates for Strathfield? We are not comparing "Apples with Apples" and this simple analogy demonstrates that the adjoining suburbs do not have the same planning principles and a one size fits all will be a disaster for Strathfield. In the long term, it will result in one suburb taking on a higher financial responsibility than another.

How can an across the board policy not, in the long term, have an affect on the unique character of Strathfield in light of the land size and low density zoning?

How can it be fair that we have a Council that is debt free, to now force us to be responsible for the debt of Ashfield (9.4m), Burwood \$6.7 m) (Leichhardt (11.4) and Marrickville 15.2 total = 42.7 million. Of course, our rates will go up because we will be responsible for these debts.

Can the State Government guarantee that our costs will not increase to pay for the cost of amalgamation, the collective debts, redundancy costs and the future infrastructure backlog?

¹ S. Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal Corporate Governance Statement, p1.

I have calculated that after the Government has contributed its assistance package of 280 million we are left with a further 160 million debt. Who pays for all of these debts?

(k) the known and or likely costs and benefits of amalgamations for local communities .

Why do the Terms of Reference, not include the negatives for local communities? This is a genuine concern of mine that the Terms of Reference are not acknowledging that for the residents of Strathfield we are facing a situation which is akin to Germany in the Euro – the residents will have to carry Burwood, Marrickville, Ashfield and Leichhardt’s debt.

What a burden that the residents of Strathfield will have forced upon them – this is manifestly unfair and the residents of Strathfield will be dismayed when the future chaos and rate increases become real as the Mega Council tries to reconcile the books so that it can move forward.

(n) protecting and delivering democratic structures for local government that ensure it remains close to the people it serves.

This is my main concern. The democratic structures that I understand, at a very basic level, is that my voice is reduced from 1 in 40,000 to 1 in 350,000 people. How can this be allowed to happen?

I understand that my representation from Strathfield will reduce to 1. How can we lobby 1 person who then has to lobby a further 6 people on Council. Why would a representative from Marrickville be concerned with a general or legal complication that is happening in Strathfield?

I have been part of a community group which has rallied the residents to fight a 3A development. The matter has now been heard on appeal in the Land & Environment Court and it will require our Council, with committed local Councillors, to monitor the compliance of the conditions that the Court has set down. This organisation has previously breached its Land & Environment Court Judgment and it is highly likely that it will do so again. Amalgamation is a gift for this organisation.

Therefore, if this company does breach its conditions, will we have to lobby 1 person from Strathfield and 6 people from Ashfield, Canada Bay, Marrickville, Leichhardt and Burwood? Why would they want to spend money to defend the residents of Strathfield, who will be perceived as “pampered and wealthy” with their large blocks of land and homes surrounded by manicured gardens. The

State Government should be proud of the fact that a suburb like Strathfield has been able to survive in the densely populated inner west and should do its utmost to protect it.

The character of Strathfield is fundamentally different from, say Marrickville. Why would they sympathize with the dangerous traffic chaos created by this development on residential streets?

Strathfield is one of the oldest established residential suburbs in Sydney. It is regarded as the “Oasis of the West” because it is a garden suburb. My suburb has specific controls which have been built up over time to protect this precious suburb. The existing traditional scale and rhythm of the existing built form is in place as a result of controls placed by our Council over time. It’s large blocks are the essence and highlight of the suburb – who is going to be concerned that the integrity of this suburb is going to be lost?

How can a statement by IPART “State Government should encourage and develop incentives to form collaborative arrangements in relation to regulatory functions”. Is it suggested that incentives, as opposed to legal action be the process the Mega Council will utilize to ensure that organisations comply with their development applications?

How can the Government state that \$36 million will be saved by preventing councils from imposing conditions of consent above what is required by the building code. This reinforces my concern that the building codes which have been built up over time to protect Strathfield will be lost by financial imperatives. What a shame for the inner west that the “Oasis of the West” will dissolve over time.

How can we navigate the compliance of any development with a mega Council? How can they spend money without the approval of all of the Councillors? How can a mega council monitor every development approval with 6 major suburbs jockeying for money?

In conclusion, I am trying to articulate to the Legislative Council that I feel that my representation is important and I have assumed that I have an implied freedom of political communication as a resident of Strathfield, so I am having trouble reconciling that amalgamation will protect and deliver democratic structures for local government and ensure it remains close to the people it services.

How can a unique suburb such as Strathfield, be subjected to uniform processes as a “one size fits all” formula, when its character is totally different to Marrickville, Ashfield, and Leichhardt?

How can it be democratic to force me to take on the existing debt and infrastructure backlog of Ashfield, Burwood, Leichhardt, Canada Bay and Marrickville?

In conclusion, I am urging the Legislative Council to address each suburb individually and ask themselves how it is equitable for the residents of Strathfield to lose their 1 in 5,714 representation, increase my rates due to my land size, inherit a \$42.7 million debt, pay for the cost of the amalgamation (\$160 million) and inherit the collective infrastructure debt of \$247.6 million.

Is the State Government acknowledging that Strathfield Council’s infrastructure backlog is \$3.5 million and expects us to be lost in the infrastructure backlog of \$160 million?

If the State Government are forcing amalgamation because “process of reform extends beyond the efficiency of effectiveness of current service levels by Councils. It is opportunity to improve the sustainability of the sector and build capacity into the system to enhance services functions. ... ability to manage major regional facilities and undertake or facilitate major economic and infrastructure development for the benefit of ratepayers in NSW and future generations.”²

If the above statement is the crux of the issue, I feel that the State Government are really only concerned with the development along Parramatta Road so as to satisfy developers who do not have to deal with individual council and pesky residents who submit submissions to protect their suburb. I am requesting the Legislative assembly to not create a situation where the community will have no say in the development of their suburb even though they have to live with the consequences.

There should be a particular “Body” created to navigate the circumstances of Parramatta road and the West Connex only, but to use this as a premise to amalgamate 6 councils and create a mega council is absurd and long term chaos will ensue.

² IPART’s Methodology for Assessment of Council