

SUBMISSION TO IPART

Introduction

I object to the process through which IPART has been given the role of examining the structures of local governments and the potential to recommend forced amalgamation of councils. I believe the argument for or against council amalgamations should be put to a referendum concurrently with the next local government elections which are due to be held in September 2016.

Furthermore, I would be most surprised if more than a small number of individual ratepayers and residents make a submission to this Inquiry due to the amount of time and effort required to write a considered response. If that is the case, the results of this Inquiry will mostly reflect the views of Councils. While this is crucial of course, it would much more informative and reflective of wider community wishes for IPART to consider a greater number of submissions from individuals and non-council groups.

It is my understanding that due to the Government's deadlines, the IPART panel has in effect only been given sufficient time to allocate one day per submission of each Council across NSW to review and analyse them. Marrickville Council's proposal alone is 35 pages, and has 9 attachments totalling even more pages. If this time allocation is correct, I ask: how this can be considered adequate and fair (unless of course a decision has already been made)? I truly hope it is not the case that only one day per council report will be allocated and that the IPART Expert Advisory Panel will carefully analyse the contents of all the Councils' submissions on their merits rather than accepting presupposed or preferred outcomes set by the NSW Government.

I am a resident and ratepayer who has lived in the Marrickville Council area for over four years. Having read Marrickville Council's submission to IPART 's *Fit for the Future*, and having attended a public meeting held by Council and Morrison Lowe representatives, I make the following comments:

Fit for the Future

A most telling paragraph in the IPART **Executive Summary of (p 1) Methodology for Assessment of Council Fit for the Future Proposals Local Government — Assessment Methodology**, June 2015 notes:

The focus of the reform process extends beyond the efficiency or effectiveness of current service levels by councils. It is an opportunity to improve the sustainability of the sector and ***build capacity*** into the system to enhance the range of services and functions councils are able to undertake. ***For example, the 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 to come.....*** (My italicised emphasis).

So, even if councils can demonstrate now and into the next ten years or more their adequacy or even excellence in operating efficiently, within budget, and effectively for the community they serve, it would seem this is insufficient to address the State Government's real agenda. I read the above extract as code for allowing even greater inroads than is currently the case by Big Development of whatever size and shape the NSW Government wants, unencumbered by current LEPs and DCPs (which are already flexible enough to allow for oversize developments). I also see this as an opaque way for the Government to by-pass the NSW Parliament and expand its current planning powers which are *already* extensive under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 ("the EP&A Act"), particularly Part 4 and through the Joint Regional Planning Panels.

Currently, Marrickville Council is allowing residential and commercial developments which do not take into account the immediate amenity of their surroundings – often built to the boundary with no setback and at heights out of scale to the immediate surrounding buildings. If this is permissible within Council’s current LEPs and DCPs, one can only guess at the State Government’s true intention behind the *Fit For the Future* Inquiry which could decide to recommend compulsory amalgamations resulting in far larger councils. This would mean fewer elected councillors and fewer council staff to address the needs of a larger community. Moreover, such amalgamations could result in massive building overdevelopment, loss of open space and amenity, among other important considerations.

In effect, amalgamations could simply remove the last remaining barriers to unelected, unrepresentative developers deciding where to build their preferred development of any height, scale and bulk, almost without challenge. The implications for traffic congestion would be unprecedented.

Missing in the consideration of this whole process are other elements that comprise the richness and complexity of local communities - for example uniqueness of the local area; sense of place, historical links and the value of associated heritage areas; communities of interest; demographics – the spread of age-and-stage groupings and what this means for housing needs, schools, hospitals, shopping and a range of open spaces; and cultural life. I am pleased to note that Marrickville Council’s submission includes analysis and accounts of most of these elements.

I note however there is no mention of the impacts of human-induced climate change in any of the *Fit for the Future* Inquiry documents – both for current consideration and in possible merged council scenarios. This is a crucial omission by the State Government.

Summary/Conclusion

It is not sufficient for the current State Government to decide, without completely transparent and widely consultative processes, how local government areas should plan for and operate into the future. Local government remains the most accessible form of direct democratic representation of ordinary people (residents and citizens) than at either State or Federal levels. Merging council areas into much larger ones will simply reduce this direct representation further.

I accept the evidence presented by Marrickville Council (Council Improvement Proposal, Existing Structure, 2 June 2015) that it can meet almost all of the *Fit for the Future* criteria benchmarks within five years and support Marrickville Council’s Improvement Action Plan.

I have seen no persuasive evidence to date that larger, merged councils of populations around 300,000 people are necessarily more effective or efficient. In any case, such terms do not reflect inclusiveness of a wide range of community members and their needs, nor the complexities and characteristics of individual local government areas.

Marrickville Council is far from perfect. There are areas where more accountability and “efficiency” can be found. However, as far as current State Government planning laws allow, I want Marrickville municipality’s local identity, local representation and direct accountability to its community to remain, through a stand-alone Council, with a sufficient number of representative councillors.

I also want as much environmental sustainability as can be offered in the current circumstances. There is no evidence offered so far that larger merged councils will address the many challenges to our changing climate and wider environment, or do anything other than enable “open slather” development and encourage more traffic congestion with fewer controls by local councils.

Adrienne Shilling



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