

IPART Submission – Council Amalgamations

In my view the Willoughby Council submission lacks a certain integrity of due process and sound planning. Certainly it had a change of senior management positions in the consultation period. However, shortly following release of state government Fit for the Future plans, Council took a formal decision to oppose amalgamations. Council's subsequent activity has then been about substantiating that position with commissioning of consultant reports but without due consultation with its citizens. One community input meeting was held, but poorly attended. Which is more telling of a lack in council than of its citizens. To its credit Council does have a wonderful record of community engagement in its Bush Care initiatives, but these do not extend across other important challenges facing council. In a last minute bid to retrofit community consultation Council conducted a short survey of Options. Even then there were no accompanying in-depth explanations of the merits and disadvantages of the Options, as would apply in a referendum.

Given the exposure of state and local government bodies to types of corruption that directly relate to their core functions of licensing and issue of permits (i.e., especially relating to land), some ratepayers are becoming more sceptical when witnessing political events over recent years. In this context especially of motives for council amalgamations which potentially involve opaque politically- or developer-backed lobby groups. The case for amalgamations must be made and it must be substantial; based on more than rational economic thinking, but reflective of how our citizens can be supported in all their rich cultural diversity and individual complexity of need. Further, we need to reconsider using some of the lost roots of ancient Athenian democracy, where citizen input is central to this significant agenda. For where council and politicians rely on a cloistered-expert approach to decision-making, not only do they ignore the inherent richness of a diverse society, but they blunt democracy's comparative advantage. Is it no wonder we will see ratepayers rightly argue strongly to maintain a forum in which to express their views on local issues.

Willoughby Council failed to seize the opportunity to reflect on its differentiated place in the three tiered government structure, and to articulate this role and strengthen it. It really failed to initiate an alternative conversation that proactively responds with an intellectual rigour that might better respond to Council sustainability challenges. Accordingly, it also failed to explore other organisational structure options that might better meet a sustainable future. Which leads me to question if Councillors' skill sets are sufficient for good governance going forward. Council's differentiated space includes community engagement. Ratepayers applaud councils like Lane Cove Council which do attempt to engage them in their local issues. Maybe good governance and community engagement need to be separately organised at a local level.

My conclusion from reading sample reports is that most councils appear to have taken a defensive stance to a state government sustainability challenge, with their responses hastily assembled together.

