

27 July 2015

Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal
Local Government Division
Review of Local Council Fit for the Future Proposals
PO Box K35
Haymarket Post Shop NSW 1`240

Dear Sir/Madam,

I write to express my deep concern about and opposition to the proposals for a mega council created by the amalgamation of the City of Sydney with Woollahra, Waverley, Randwick and Botany Councils.

Efficient government is not necessarily larger government and bigger councils are **not** necessarily better councils.

Local councils are the most democratic level of government with greater public participation than other forms of government. Councils must stay close to and responsive to the people.

Local government is the personally accessible tier of government where residents have direct access to the people responsible for service delivery and to their elected representatives.

Local government needs to be kept small to ensure its distinctive role of allowing local community input into the decisions that most affect residents on a day to day basis.

Residents prefer small local government that delivers more democratic representation and greater quality of life control at the local level.

The ingredients of a necessary close relationship between the community, elected council and council staff are:

- Community involvement in all decision-making. Without this, individuals feel disempowered and consequently alienated.
- Elected councillors who are accessible to all members of the community and responsive to their needs. As councillors are largely unpaid for their work, this relationship requires that the workload on individual councillors is not excessive.
- Elected councillors who reflect the range and diversity of opinion, interest and socio-economic background in the community.
- Formalised systems of involving community participation. The precinct system is an example of this.

Community services are usually best delivered at a local level. Larger bureaucracies are frequently less targeted, more impersonal and less caring.

Economies of scale can be achieved through existing and future co-operation between councils for purchase of plant and equipment and the delivery of services. We note that some councils are already planning and promoting this approach.

We do not want “efficient” councils that are business enterprises, concerned about the bottom line instead of the needs and interests of the community which elects them.

Assessing efficiency by purely or even primarily economic criteria is a damaging and unproductive approach in a situation where such things as the range, quality and cost of services provided and the satisfaction among service recipients cannot be measured in monetary terms alone.

Time and transparency are the enemy of vested interests, undue influence, outside interference, backroom deals and corruption, all of which have plagued some councils at various times.

Mega councils are too large to provide real open government, efficient precinct committee systems, open council and committee meetings, provision of many council documents, effective information and consultation processes, and accessible councillors.

Arguments for larger councils are often accompanied by calls for fewer councillors on the grounds that this will give “more efficient” decision-making.

However, such a move would increase the workload of remaining councillors to a point at which they can no longer communicate with and effectively represent their constituents.

In addition, fewer councillors mean fewer sources of scrutiny, fewer alternative viewpoints, fewer challenges to their advice, and fewer people to convince. In short, a smaller council is easier for council staff to control.

An optimal council area should contain approximately 60,000 residents and be serviced by at least 12 councillors. The area should be divided up into three or four wards with three or four representatives elected from each ward.

This model gives a ratio of 1 councillor to 5,000 voters and should ensure that councillors are reasonably accessible to residents and that their workload is not so overwhelming that they have no time for their electorates.

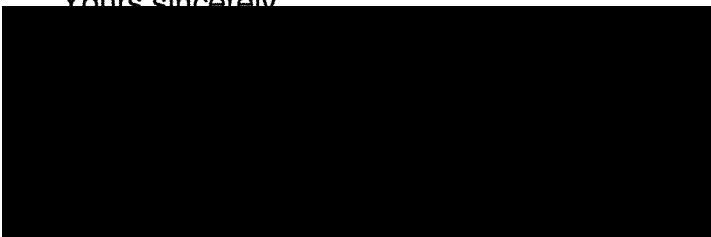
In our view, local government should not be seen as a business with its primary concern being economic efficiency, and elected councillors should not become directors who let the managers manage. There must be no change from service provision to profit generation.

Domination of the profit motive in the name of efficiency does not augur well for continued productive partnerships with the community or the delivery of appropriate services to less well-resourced sectors.

Service delivery by local councils must give weight to human, social, employment and environmental costs above purely economic considerations, recognising that service comes before profit.

On a more personal note, as a Glebe resident I have experienced moving from Leichhardt Council to the City of Sydney Council. I share with many local residents experiences of disempowerment and alienation as a result of this change from a genuinely local, responsive, democratic and community oriented council to a far larger municipal council. The only way this has been to a limited extent ameliorated is through the concept of Sydney City Council being a collection of "villages".

Yours sincerely



Dr Hannah Middleton