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Sydney2030/Green/Global/Connected

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Fit for the Future IPART Review

To Members of Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Fit for the Future program. I have strong concerns about this set of reforms. As a local Councillor I see first-hand the value that local government provides to the community. As I will not be recontesting my position as a City of Sydney Councillor in the scheduled 2016 election, this submission is made in the spirit of concern for the future rather than an attempt to secure an ongoing position as a City Councillor.

Local Government in NSW is responsible for a broad range of vital services that have a significant impact on the day to day lives of residents. Aside from the obvious services such as waste disposal, development approvals and local roads, local government also provides other important social services that support the community. This includes supporting and managing the urban environment, library services, management of companion animals, provision of recreational facilities and restaurant safety inspections. Many Councils provide additional services as requested by the local communities that they represent.

This ability to tailor services to suit the local community is an attribute which sets local government apart from other levels of government. The City of Sydney conducts wide ranging community consultation on a broad range of issues in all of our neighbourhoods. As a Councillor I am regularly contacted by residents and community action groups. I have successfully advocated on a large number of issues they have raised including service delivery, public safety and amenity, support for disadvantaged members of the community and community engagement projects. Under an amalgamated Council my capacity to engage with these residents in a meaningful way and represent their concerns would not be possible. A large part of my work has been advocating for disadvantaged individuals whose unique circumstances are not understood by larger bureaucracies, such as Housing NSW. My advocacy and support has improved outcomes for a large number of residents. Significantly increasing the size of local government would mean that much of my interaction with residents would be reduced to sending a form letter.

city of villages

The City of Sydney's IPART/Fit for the Future submission demonstrates my Council's capacity to meet the coming populations and infrastructure challenges. I have endorsed this submission at a Council meeting and while I won't repeat the details of the submission here, I do wish to draw the panel's attention to some of the contents that demonstrate the City's very strong financial position. Although the City has around 200 000 residents it effectively meets the needs of 1.2 million workers on a daily basis. The average number of residents per Council in the OECD is 104 500. The proposed merger of the City of Sydney, Botany Bay, Randwick, Waverley and Woollahra would create a Council with a residential population of over 500 000 people.

In addition to meeting the daily needs of 1.2million people the City has committed significant funds to large scale infrastructure projects such as the CBD Light Rail (\$220 million) and the Green Square Town Centre (\$800 million). On these numbers, the City exceeds expectations for service delivery. The City's ability to meet these challenges proves its ability to stand alone. Under a proposed amalgamation these infrastructure programs would not be possible as this funding would be redistributed across a vast and highly populated section of Sydney. I

It is the City's fine grain approach to dealing with neighbourhoods that demonstrates its real success. The City hosts over 100 community consultations per year and regularly has detailed conversations with community leaders and groups regarding the future of their neighbourhoods. Through this, the City has been able to tailor its community service delivery to reflect the needs of the communities. The result is a diverse group of community centres, arts centres and environmental services. Aside from the direct service delivery the City also supports a large number of arts, cultural and welfare organisations. Some of these organisations support disadvantaged groups within our local government area such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the LGBTI community and youth at risk.

More broadly the City has also been able to respond to community concern regarding the global climate crisis and become a national leader on energy efficiency and environmental schemes. Broad consultation informed the City's Sustainable Sydney 2030 Strategy and leading experts in energy and environmental programs were engaged. As a result, the City is well placed to meet its goal of 70% cut in emissions levels (below 2005 levels) by 2030.

These impressive achievements by the City of Sydney would not be possible under a Council of 500 000 plus residents. The shift to higher density living to accommodate a growing population will mean significant natural growth in resident numbers of the local government areas without the need for amalgamations or boundary expansions. The City's population is forecast to grow by almost 40% in the next 20 years. The more than 500 000 population of the proposed amalgamated Council would reach approximately 700 000 in twenty years' time.

The City's partnerships with the community has allowed it to lead the way on a number of infrastructure and service issues that other levels of government have failed to act upon. The City's advocacy for new public schools in the inner city demonstrates Council understands local community needs ahead of other levels of government. When considering the role of local government as a channel between community voices and the larger state and federal government bodies, this governance will disrupt proper democratic process, and encourage a top-down style of governance in its place.

The NSW Government has designed the Fit for the Future reforms around the false assumption that larger Councils are more efficient. As noted in the City's IPART submission, its prior experience of amalgamation between South Sydney and Sydney Council caused considerable disruption and took five years to fully integrate both organisations. In Victoria, where amalgamations have already taken place, the experience has resulted in an increase in rates for residents.

It is worth noting that, in NSW, there is not a clear link between the size of a Council and its financial position. There is a wide variety of complex reasons why some NSW Councils are in less fortunate financial circumstances. While some are challenged with a limited income base, others face infrastructure challenges.

What is common to all NSW Councils is that their ability to transform their financial situation is limited by the decisions of State and Federal Government. Rates paid by residents and businesses are capped by the Department of Local Government. Funding support for infrastructure projects is also determined by other levels of government. The Abbott Government's current austerity regime, which has seen significant amounts of funding for critical services including health and education cut in successive budgets, will also likely have an impact on local government. With the current funding shortfall experienced by the NSW Government there is likely to be a flow on effect to local communities.

The greatest impact of the NSW Government's vision of large, amalgamated Councils will be the loss of authentic community representation. As a representative of my local neighbourhood of inner city Redfern I have strong links with local citizens and community groups. Like many Councillors across NSW I understand the challenges my community is facing because I have been actively engaged with the community long before I was elected. Under large amalgamated councils, most engaged community activists simply won't be able to afford to run for office. The financial cost of promoting your candidacy will limit the field of potential Councillors to people with access to significant personal funds or funding from business or major political parties. Local Government would not be truly representative of local communities.

The City's consultation process with residents and local businesses regarding the Fit for the Future reforms and Council amalgamations found that 71% of residents and 62% of businesses supported the City to stand alone. After survey respondents were told that the City received a 'strong' financial sustainability appraisal from NSW Treasury and has no debts these figures rose 82% and 69% for residents and businesses respectively. Similar surveys in Botany Bay, Woollahra, Waverley and Randwick have also found that residents endorse their respective Councils to stand alone.

Ultimately the decision to amalgamate should be left with the communities who will be affected. The Fit for the Future reform program is an opaque process. By keeping the final IPART report out of public hands the Baird Government will make the final decision on the future of our local communities. This is a deeply flawed process that does not offer any genuine engagement with citizens. Local communities must have a stronger say in local government reform. Amalgamations should be approved by a ballot of residents that will be affected by these changes.

I thank the panel again for the opportunity to comment on the Fit for the Future process and, more broadly, on the process of local government reform. I hope the committee will place the concerns of residents at the centre of their report to the Legislative Council.



Irene Doutney
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City of Sydney