

ONE FAMILY'S OPINIONS ON THE ISSUE OF THE AMALGAMATION OF MOSMAN COUNCIL  
WITH FIVE OTHER COUNCILS SUBMITTED TO THE INDEPENDENT PRICING AND  
REGULATORY TRIBUNAL (IPART).JULY 19.2015.

FROM WILLIAM TUCK AND FAMILY INDEPENDENT MOSMAN, NSW RESIDENTS.

Mosman residents are often close to their Council and look to it to provide senior, youth and disabled services, advice on planning, development and regulatory issues, information and communications on matters of local community interest.

We also look to Council and its decision makers for environmental decisions as they affect the community and enforcement of regulations as they see fit on the development and general usage of council assets.

Council also looks after community groups, especially youth and senior groups providing sporting, social and arts activities highlighted by Mosman's very prominent and outstanding art gallery.

Our family lives, not fronting Sydney Harbour but in a typical suburban street, situated in a local government area that has many attributes. It is not a precious existence but it favours lawful activities and neighbourliness to benefit a Mosman community and has benefits for the whole suburb and Mosman as a whole.

This suburb is governed partially by our Mosman Council, maintaining high standards and worthy and picturesque streetscapes for which the whole of metropolitan Sydney benefits, also contributed to by other beautiful suburbs. Mosman also faces numerous challenges in that it not only has to help preserve the streetscapes, buildings and architecture within its boundaries, but also the environmental values of its foreshore and surrounds enjoyed not only by local residents but also a much wider visitor community. The attitude by many in this state may be that we are a privileged suburb, but like many we lead ordinary lives.

Mosman Council also cares for its citizens with services for the disadvantaged, youth and elderly including respite care, community transport, social support, counselling, home library, meals on wheels and youth groups. The Council delivers many other services like Mosman Library and assistance with community groups and events. With so much at stake many in the suburb have views on the activities, plans or changes that might affect the community even to the decisions at the State and Federal level. For instance the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust's open space and infrastructure interests, especially at historic foreshore locations.

Issues of a wider nature that affect all of Mosman citizens often occur. The deliberations of the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) and its proposed effects on Council's ability to locally govern this suburb, is a case in point.

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Our family has very strong feelings about the potential loss, through a six council merger, of our democratic right to decide who will represent our views and make decisions that adhere to the majority view of Mosman's residents. We present here our personal views on this unpleasant proposal. We believe this proposal is driven not just by an aim to save money, which is doubtful because the stated sums of losses are unproven. Statistics to support this assertion have not been provided.

Our community widely believes this proposal is an attempt to ensure that planning decisions, in cooperation with developers, are processed throughout the state with minimum interference from council residents. Supporters of this proposal we believe are attempting to stop those who wish to have a say on how their local every day Mosman environment continues and survives.

## THE MOSMAN VIEW AND THE ILGRP REPORT.

We view many of the general contents of the 136 page report mostly as it relates to sections on financial reform, sustainability, productivity with great interest. We understand perceived benefits of elements that could assist council. However we already receive strong and skilled financial advice from a highly talented and respected economics and Treasury advisor as Mayor, Peter Abelson and his Council team. Thus we believe Mosman's finances are in good hands.

That said, we have a view about on-going financial aspects of the ILGRP report and real reservations about its concentration on suggestions that amalgamation of councils is the solution for local government reform. Amalgamation is a constant recommendation of the ILGRP and presence in the final report, despite a clear commitment by the State Government, before the last NSW elections, that there would be no forced amalgamations of councils.

It is recognised that during the election campaign the issue of council amalgamations was largely avoided by the State Coalition. This was recognised as an attempt to reduce public criticism and to revealing that no forced amalgamations that were previously promised would be ignored on the Coalition's return to power.

Commentary on amalgamation, takes up a significant amount of space in the ILGRP report and what the authors see as the perceived benefits that mergers will achieve. This is despite ILGRP's knowledge of the previous promise made by State Government of "no forced amalgamations."

ILGRP must also be aware that the Mosman community does not want its Council to be subject to amalgamation. In the last Local Government and previous elections over 80 percent of Mosman electors voted against any amalgamation for the suburb and like Council

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cannot see the benefits of such action, especially when there is no evidence, to back-up benefits, of doing so. This should be looked at in light of the decisions of WA and Tasmania not to forcefully amalgamate their councils and the fact that Queensland and Victoria are already de-amalgamating councils despite having undergone recent previous mergers of councils in their states,

Our family, like many others, trusts that "no forced amalgamations" will continue to be the position of government. This latest consideration of the issue makes this seem like a breach of trust. This promise is one that is most important to our community and many others in NSW. Like us they would view a reversal of the State Government's "no amalgamation position" as a broken promise and exercise of power arrogantly exercised without majority residential support.

## JOINT ORGANISATIONS

The ILGRP supports the establishment of new type statutory recognised Joint Organisations (JOs) for the Sydney Metropolitan region. They would be mainly responsible for strategic planning and JOs would replace County Councils.

However, work of the JO type has been in place for some time and is being improved on a steady basis. This presents one of the best activities for improving council operations and financial arrangements. For instance the proposed ILGRP region that includes Mosman has not recognised that the suburb is already a member of a constructive and efficient JO type organisation, the North Shore Regional Organisation of Councils (NSROC) made up of four Councils. Current negotiations are also underway to merge NSROC with the Shore Regional Organisation of Councils (SHOROC) which comprises seven council areas, the aim being the sharing of resources and developing activities between the 11 councils that are members of the ROCs.

A SHOROC and NSROC cooperative combination should happen as soon as possible and this type of arrangement may well be suitable for other councils. Our family disagrees with the suggestion that significant resources should be allocated by councils to support the establishment and running of JOs. The question is where would such resources come from. We suspect from ratepayers. NSROC and SHOROC operating jointly, in a cooperative manner would be a reasonable and workable compromise using already existing manpower and resources. These joint activities of the two ROCs will also have many further benefits through the involvement of collective work through the Sydney Metropolitan Mayors organisation.

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We do agree with the development of closer working arrangements or partnerships between ROCs and State agencies with particular emphasis on strategic planning, service delivery and infrastructure development. This is an important aim but one that should be delivered through NSROC and SHOROC.

## THE MOSMAN COMMUNITY

We support any programmes that communicate and inform us and all ratepayers of activities undertaken and delivered by Council together with other issues in the Council's orbit that may affect the community. A community strength is that it supplies finance through the rates it pays. Their well-being and trust, we believe, is valued by Council, that is why we urge Councillors to work hard to ensure that the community is kept fully informed on issues of importance to the suburb. Direct elections help this process and Mosman holds direct elections for the Mayor and Councillors to ensure popular support and agreeable programmes and decisions.

However, there seems to be a context in the ILGRP report that mixes up the aims and services of Local Government, with wider aims of State Government. This presents different challenges. For instance, it would be unimaginable, on a wider scale, to adopt amalgamation of Botany Bay, Randwick, Sydney, Waverley and Woollahra representing a population of 669,400, nearly 270,000 larger than the self-governing Australian Capital Territory run by its own legislative council.

Local Government provides support for a completely different sector as that served by individual states and territories. Whilst the ILGRP report recommends a sharp focus on the need for partnerships between the two forms of government there is no denying that a partnership already exists. However, councils fulfil a community need, one that State Government, by its very make-up cannot meet.. The report suggests that local government is in competition with State Government but we are puzzled by this assertion and do not see any competition between the two. Cooperation yes, competition no.

We accept, begrudgingly, that rates may need to rise but disagree strongly. with the report's views on the removal of discounted rates for elderly and disadvantaged ratepayers and the assertion that this responsibility should be taken up as a State or Federal responsibility. The size of rate amounts is also another thorny matter. As for many residents not knowing their councillors, that may well be so, but residents already have access to the higher levels of Council and its officers whenever it is possible, access that we believe would be rare should mega councils swallow up a number of different regions and councils.

We believe that residents would presently have more access to State or Federal representatives than they would to mega council officers, where council budgets would be thinner because of demands spread over so many residents and manpower stretched across

enormous numbers of ratepayers., The present council access that the community receives is one they treasure. We say that to our knowledge, the community gains access to responsible Councillors and staff whenever they need to and broadly they are satisfied with their treatment.

## VOLUNTEERS

Mosman is a close community with over 400 volunteers registered with Council alone, working to support the elderly, meals on wheels, community transport, respite care, youth groups and support for the disadvantaged, bush regeneration, cultural and art activities and much more. This work is supported by a robust group of citizens who use their own transport to travel on Council work and deliver results that would be of great expense to Council without their assistance.. In Mosman's case perhaps if all volunteers were utilised weekly, which is not unusual, a contributed value of \$2 million per annum.

This sort of assistance provided in an altruistic way, by caring community individuals and groups would certainly suffer under any amalgamation. The key to this association, through volunteering is a close relationship between the community, Council officers and employees and those who need sympathetic support, a relationship that would be damaged by absorption into a mega council where volunteers would feel distant and enjoy less of an association with the body representing 350,000 residents.

We believe and anecdotally we have been informed that volunteers will not be happy to deal with large mega council bureaucracies. There would also be a loss of character and social commitment to a mega council. We suggest a mass defection of volunteers will be a certainty under a mega council structure.

This community work and volunteer support, unfortunately, receives minimal attention in the ILGRP report which also has very little to say about our key audience, the communities that councils serve. Although there have been Community Forums conducted by ILGRP, feedback from these forums to communities, prior to the release of the final report, has been practically non-existent.

Finally we agree that there needs to be user friendly plans for Mosman that are easily understood by the community, especially in housing and infrastructure development, planning and service management areas like traffic and public transport. Taking responsibilities away from communities in the form of any plans for new boundaries and associated new planning laws and a repeat of some form of code assessment are also resented and rejected by us and many in the general community.

## FINANCE.

We are concerned at original evaluations of Mosman as one of the weaker financial councils in Sydney when all the evidence available shows Mosman has a strong, short and long term financial position.

This ILGRP judgement of Mosman's position, calculated by NSW Treasury Corporation (TCorp) is totally confusing to our community in that in the same report, TCorp also named Council as being only one of five out of 152 NSW Councils with a "positive" financial outlook over the next three years. Mosman Mayor Peter Abelson, a noted economist himself, has criticised the sources for these judgements on inconsistent data, inappropriate use of accounting ratios and a two year old one off devaluation of asset reports. Other issues include variations within councils in the treatment of depreciation. According to the ILGRP report this TCorp assessment issue raises questions from other councils as well as Mosman and has now been referred to the Division for Local Government for checking. This process is as yet unresolved.

Unfortunately, the report highlights the ILGRP's "weak" Mosman evaluation which in our view is confusing and must be reviewed. Mosman Mayor, Peter Abelson, has commented on TCorp's methodology and has stated that the rating allocated to them was incorrect. The result has been requests and supply of revised data and updated information by several councils. That updated information is now being re-assessed. This rider on the new data provision, is contained within the ILGRP's final report. In the circumstances, which existed at the time of the release of the final report, it seems that continual highlighting of Mosman as a "weak" performer is a judgement that is based on questionable data. It would have been better to make judgements based on new data and the outcome of the TCorp review and re-assessment. It is therefore disappointing that the report highlighted the old TCorp material when it was aware a review was underway which might change the financial assessments of councils.

We do not agree that excessive exemptions and concessions are rife but on the understanding that an independent body that is representative of the target audience is part of the group examining this issue we feel more comfortable.. Council does a good job here and to replace such scrutiny with a state backed group smacks of budget savings that are not warranted. Saying, as the report does, that such concessions etc are not a Local Government responsibility suggests nobody has a duty of care here. It is unlikely that if councils do not take a lead on such concessions, especially rates, State Government will not do so as they seem to be less than interested in the views of seniors or disadvantaged people. This lack of sympathy for seniors and other communities is one that the National Seniors association is pursuing at State and National levels and receives widespread support in suburbs such as Mosman. The electorate sees that the State government is insensitive to

less wealthy individuals and families, They appear to place far more emphasis on infrastructure than help for NSW citizens of all ages, It seems politically unwise to suggest concessions be abolished by councils and given to some other body, as a responsibility, when the outcome of concessions is unclear. Such a removal of concessions could make councils the scapegoat for any adjustment or possible elimination. The concession issue has already generated heat at the elderly and disadvantaged community level and it seems disingenuous, as the ILGRP report has done, to shift the blame onto councils with an inevitable backlash.

We agree with the ILGRP that establishing a state borrowing facility would encourage councils to make a better use of debt, where appropriate and would reduce interest rates paid by councils. An added attraction is providing low cost treasury and management advisory services.

## CONCLUSION.

The highlights of our comments rely on cherry picking the more important issues that we agree with from a community point of view. ILGRP says this treatment (cherry picking) is not an appropriate or acceptable process. As private citizens we do not have the time or manpower to construct fully researched comment on everything the ILGRP proposes as we recognise it is not within our ability, from a community viewpoint, to dissect every item in detail. However, we think the above comments represent a wrap-up of community concerns in giving an overall view of the proposals. That's not to say that there are no other positive or contentious issues that we could have addressed. This is more of a concise evaluation of what we think about the report and what we observe as major issues.

We agree however, that there are many more issues within the paper that need special attention and we urge further discussion as the changes suggested are reviewed. Council amalgamations are an ongoing challenge and we suggest that the State Government's pre-election commitment to the "no forced amalgamation" pledge would be welcome and popular among electors. Despite all the issues about such a change in the report we urge the existing promise be re-affirmed.

As a final act we do point the issues that we feel are relevant and argue against forced council amalgamations;

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## KEY ISSUES

Amalgamations mean the dismissal of local mayors and councillors and if other state evidence is followed administrators will take over.

.Unless administrators have local knowledge, are completely independent of government, development and planning businesses and possess local knowledge and communication skills they will not be widely accepted to make community decisions and stay true to majority community desires and environmental standards.

.Immediately local environmental plans are abandoned when administrators are appointed.. Mosman has a five storey limit on high rise and rules on shadowing, overlooking etc .There is a widespread community distrust of planning and development issues in this and other states. We all fear that new environmental standards will not favour local communities but will mean excessive changes to well above this height and obsessive high rise development in inappropriate areas.. This will affect community interaction and create loss of sunlight and many other environmental issues

.Bigger is not better. Bigger councils mean less access to services and interaction between residents and their councils. It is also proven that larger councils are subject to corruption and pro developer biases that have already been exposed in ICAC hearings.

.Mega councils such as Botany et al will create huge residential councils and in Botany's case is over 270,000 bigger than the ACT that governs its own right free of state government interference. It begs the question of whether a council of this size could ever be anything else but a new form of government a structure unfortunately that does not seem anything like Local.

.Volunteers will not work for mega councils and will create a shortfall of manpower running into millions of dollars. This loss will also remove local contact with the elderly and disadvantaged needs and sick residents who rely on local support.

.The State Minister for Planning represents Bathurst in the Parliament. Unfortunately his electorate headquarters, Bathurst, has enormous debts. Bathurst has \$22 in outstanding loans and needs \$72 million to bring local assets up to standards, Is this not proof that bigger is not better.

,Oberon like so many other NSW towns in a good financial state is vetted as a target for a mega council merger with Bathurst leaving Oberon residents over \$90 million out of pocket. This is a mega merger reality



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. In metropolitan Sydney many councils with healthy balance sheets will be merged with less healthy partners at cost to ratepayers of substantial sums. That means substantial rate increases

.Heritage listed buildings and streetscapes are feared targets for mega council mergers where it is widely viewed that the real reason for mega mergers is to give developers easier powers to take over low rise streets and completely dominate their landscapes with high rise

.Developers have a bad record in relation to heritage listings and such developments as those in Parramatta, Haberfield and Annandale, Mosman and many other suburbs bear witness to their carefree attitude to our city's history.

. Research from University of Technology (UTS) that was headlined "Council Mergers Not a Worry" in the Sydney Morning Herald are suspiciously biased in favour of amalgamations. The research carried out nationally in states where amalgamations have already occurred and in others where forced amalgamations have already been rejected (WA and Tasmania) show that now residents obviously do not see amalgamations as a worry. This reflects badly against the UTS theory that people don't care. With NSW the only state threatening mergers no wonder that the majority in other states do not care.

William and Jacqueline Tuck.

