

## **Re: Local Government Review**

### Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the future of local government in Tasmania. As a member of the public, it is welcome that the state government is reviewing the operations and considering the long-term future of local councils.

Evolving technology, population growth, and the negative effects of global heating will probably require some changes to the operations of local government. Postive changes would be those that would foster greater accountability of elective representatives to their local constituents, more collegial workplaces, greater transparency in decision-making, and fewer opportunities for corruption and nepotism. Voluntary amalgamations, and perhaps greater sharing of resources, would be advantageous if done carefully and well. Unwelcome changes would be forced council amalgamations and local councils losing the power to make planning decisions.

For the following reasons I oppose the proposal for forced amalgamations and removing the power of planning decisions from local councils:

### Objections

- Interstate examples of forced amalgamations, such as in NSW, Qld and in Phillip Island in Victoria, show that such amalgamations have serious negative results. Local communities are excluded from democratic decision-making, even though they are directly affected by the decisions that are made for them. Amalgamations are expensive, and de-amalgamations even more so. Tasmania cannot afford the economic and social cost of wide-spread local government reform when smaller reforms would suffice, or may not be needed at all. The money spent on forced amalgamations and centralized assessment panels to benefit private property developers should be spent on the continued crisis in the health system. Time after time, experience shows that communities are most productive and healthy when directly involved in helping formulate the policy that impacts their day-to-day lives, best summarized by the common expression "Nothing about us without us."
- I oppose the possible implementation of "independent assessment panels." Local councils are an important part of Australia's three tiers of government and they should not be weakened through the removal of important decision-making power. Regarding corruption, there is greater transparency and accountability having an independent statutory authority, such as local government make planning decisions, rather than a state government-appointed panel. Keeping planning decisions local means there are more people to hold property developers to account, and greater opportunity to scrutinize the actions of decision-makers. It is important that local

communities are involved in planning processes, as local lived experience and knowledge is a vital component of the successful design, construction and use of local developments.

- Tasmania is a small state. It is therefore even more important to have three genuinely independent levels of government, as state government ministers already have considerable power across multiple portfolios. Removing planning decision-making capacity from local councils, and having too few councils, poses the risk of an unacceptable centralization and concentration of political power at the state government level. Keeping decision-making across a variety of council areas also helps to protect state government ministers from undue influence. Ministers can rightly say to property developers or to combative members of their own political party that planning decisions are made in collaboration with a variety of other actors.

- An argument has been made in the media (ABC Radio Mornings) that there are some council areas in Tasmania comprised of a few thousand elderly residents who are paying rates from their pensions for the whole council area, and that therefore it would be economically fairer to force smaller councils to amalgamate to share rate-paying between more people. The concern with this proposal is that the neo-liberal rationale behind this idea leads to the neo-liberal conclusion that once amalgamated, poorer elderly residents will be deprived of essential services and the use of assets because they are not contributing as much and not "paying their way" compared to other constituents in the council area. Residents paying for most of the assets and services are naturally going to argue that they deserve for those assets and services to be in locations most convenient to them. The poorer, elderly residents, who by definition will be concentrated in one part of the new greater council area, will still have to pay rates, even if they are at reduced-cost, and yet will not as easily enjoy as many of the benefits. It is the elderly and socially vulnerable who typically most rely on such council services. It will also be harder for elderly or disadvantaged residents to attend council in person and have consistent access to decision-makers and council policies that affect them.

Thank you.