



**Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.**

## **Merger Inquiry Reports to be Kept Under Wraps**

Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc. (TRRA) has confirmed that the Minister for Local Government, Paul Toole, has no intention of making public the reports of Boundaries Commission delegates on Council Merger Proposal Inquiries before he hands down his decisions on mergers. His announcement of merger decisions could come as early as late April or May this year.

TRRA President, Geoff Washington, said that “all the residents, ratepayers and the many community organisations who attended the Inquiries would be angered by this revelation”. The delegate’s hearings in Port Stephens on the proposed merger with Newcastle City attracted at least 500 members of the public and more than 60 speakers. This merger proposal was unanimously opposed. Like TRRA, many organisations and citizens also made the effort to write detailed submissions expressing their opposition.

The expectation was that both the submissions and the Delegates’ reports to the Commission would be released prior to the announcement of merger decisions. This would have enabled the public and Councils to scrutinize the delegate’s reporting of their hearings and submissions. All parties would then have had an opportunity to properly gauge the community reaction to the proposals, and the delegate’s interpretation of that to the Government.

Mr Washington commented that “by keeping these documents under wraps until after any Ministerial announcement, flies in the face of the principles of accountability and good governance. It also raises the suspicion that there were probably too many sound arguments and figures rejecting many contested mergers, such as Port Stephens and Newcastle City. This exposure would have stood in the way of the NSW Government’s blind commitment to the philosophy that ***big is better at any cost***”.

The latest schedule for the Merger Initiative would see an accelerated process with amalgamations being announced as soon as late April, merged Councils being dismissed and replaced with interim administrations in May, clearing the way for Local Government elections as soon as in September as previously scheduled.

TRRA queries whether Port Stephens Council’s latest bid for a merger with Dungog can be accommodated in this timeline. TRRA has not had time to fully assess this proposal, but on the surface, there may be need for caution in signing up to a union with a Council which was judged by IPART to be “unfit for the future”. Dungog Council is responsible for an area 2.6 times greater than our current LGA with only 6,700 electors to foot the bill for an extensive network of rural roads and bridges.

Dick Appleby, TRRA Media Officer – 11 April 2016

