



07 June 2016

## **TRRA Submission to Public inquiry into Proposed amalgamation of Port Stephens Council and Dungog Shire Council**

The Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.(TRRA) represents the interests of the 26,000 people living on the Tomaree Peninsula on the northeastern extremity of Port Stephens LGA. Its broad objective is to protect and enhance the residential amenity and local environment, both natural and manmade. Another objective is to be “a conduit of communication between the community and its elected Councillors of Port Stephens Council, on strategic matters and in decision-making, and to assist Councillors and Council to better understand community priorities and needs”.

Most of these residents live around 90 kilometers from Dungog and have very limited common interest or social or economic interchange with that centre or its LGA. Dungog is 50 kilometers from Raymond Terrace which would probably become the location of the merged Council administration.

The case for the merger of Port Stephens Council and Dungog Shire Council which is posted on the Council Boundary Review Website was prepared by Port Stephens Council itself, with input from a consultant commissioned by Port Stephens Council. TRRA considers that this proposal has been put forward with a view to counter the Proposal for a merger with Newcastle City which was rejected by Port Stephens Council and the majority of Port Stephens Residents. TRRA also opposed the Newcastle merger in its Submission to the Inquiry on that proposal.

TRRA does not believe that the proposed merger with Dungog is in the interests of Tomaree ratepayers and residents. Similarly, we do not believe that it is in the interests of the resident and ratepayers of the remainder of Port Stephens LGA.

Having considered the business case for the current Proposed Merger with Dungog, TRRA is not convinced of the merits of a union with a Council which was judged by IPART to be “unfit for the future”. The ILGRP indicated that Dungog Shire Council did not appear financially sustainable and noted that it had received a ‘distressed’ rating in DLG’s Infrastructure Audit. ILGRP also noted that Dungog Council had its own reservations about its capacity to meet infrastructure obligations in the medium term.

TRRA has not found sufficient evidence in the business case to demonstrate any benefits for Port Stephens ratepayers in a merger with Dungog Council. That council is responsible for a sparsely populated area 2.5 times greater than our current LGA with only 6,700 electors to foot the bill for an extensive network of rural roads and bridges. IPART found Dungog not to meet the benchmark for asset maintenance and infrastructure.

Port Stephens Council, although deemed “fit for the future” has its own serious backlog in asset provision and maintenance and it is hard to see how this will be overcome by the merger with another Council which has a distressed rating in the DLG Infrastructure Audit.

TRRA also queries the extent of community of interest with Dungog whose residents might be expected to relate more to Maitland and Newcastle than Raymond Terrace or other areas of Port Stephens.

Dungog Shire is characterised by a rural economy centred on a rural service town. In sharp contrast the Tomaree Peninsula is essentially a tourism and recreational based economy with a large retirement community. It also has a significant focus on the marine and aquaculture activities associated with Port Stephens.

Given these clear differences in character it is difficult to see how the proposed merger could achieve the Government's objective of "building on shared communities of interest and strong local identity".

Geoff Washington  
President, TRRA Inc.

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