



Speech by

**Dolly Pratt**

**MEMBER FOR NANANGO**

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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs PRATT** (Nanango—Ind) (4.30 pm): I rise to speak to the Local Government and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I acknowledge that amalgamation is an issue that has been much discussed throughout the Nanango electorate for some time. Those discussions have not always been conducted in a reasonable manner by some of the participants, and those participants were not necessarily local government representatives. The general population has its own very strong and, at times, conflicting view points. Some are very supportive and others are vehemently opposed to such a move.

Over the years, and for varying reasons—primarily because they believe they will be better off—towns in various shires often wanted to become part of different shires. Such discussions always lead to the eventual or possible amalgamation of whole shires that have very small rate bases joining with other shires, allowing the pooling of resources and assisting in the overall efficiency of the relevant councils. It may also help to resolve the issue of some councils not being able to encourage qualified staff to their areas.

There has been a lot of conjecture that rural areas will suffer and miss out more than they currently do while the majority of funding will go to the larger populated towns or cities. There has been a lot of effort on the part of councils to meet the requirements of the Size, Shape, and Sustainability process. Quite understandably, many of the councils have expressed disappointment with the path the government has chosen in taking over the amalgamation agenda and forcing shires to amalgamate rather than allowing it to be put to shire residents by a referendum. It may be a little cynical of me, but I expect that, if the government had mooted its intention to force amalgamation on local governments last year prior to the election, the councils would have been up in arms, the media would have had a field day and the result for the government might not have been as resounding as it was. Thus, deferring any announcement of the intention to force amalgamations until after the election was obviously advantageous to this government.

After speaking to members of shire councils, a common comment was their disappointment. Kilcoy council had been working with Caboolture, Pine Rivers and Redcliffe and Esk, too, I believe, and would have finished the Size, Shape and Sustainability process by mid-October. That process includes community consultation and possible referendum, and it was a process that the current government supported and funded. The outcome would be a community decision on their future.

Secondly, there is a concern that this should be a transparent process and that like should be compared with like, future growth is accounted for and the community needs are held with the utmost regard. There will be close scrutiny of how the process evolves by a lot of councillors and a lot of residents of unwilling shires forced to amalgamate. However, members of the shires in my electorate who have spoken to or conveyed their thoughts on this matter did not express total opposition to amalgamation, only deep, deep disappointment that the process has been forced upon them.

Rosalie Shire Council has actively sought the community's view on the amalgamation with Crows Nest shire. A communication received from the council stated in part—

I understand the Premier is going to put in place a number of Commissioners and move to compulsory amalgamations.

We believe we have done the right thing through the size, shape and sustainability process and completed our review according to the guidelines endorsed by the State Government.

We believe we should be given the opportunity to put the work we have done to the residents of our shires so that they can determine their own future.

Rosalie and Crows Nest Shires should not be penalised for the slow take up of the SSS process by other Local Governments in Queensland.

The two Councils are due to meet next Tuesday to formally receive the Final Report and vote on its recommendations. The Draft Final Report recommended that the best option was for the two shires to amalgamate and it is expected that the Final Report will contain the same recommendations.

The final statement in the communication is in very bold type and capital letters—

THE RESIDENTS OF CROWS NEST AND ROSALIE SHIRES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE WITH THEIR OWN PROCESS OF SELF-DETERMINATION.

The sentiment that the people of shires be allowed to continue with their own process of self-determination received unanimous support. For some shires that have struggled quite considerably for some time, amalgamation seemed inevitable, although the shires are not happy about the waste of time, effort and money expended on the government's Size, Shape and Sustainability process.

Kingaroy, however, and no doubt many other shires, will be happy not to have to subject ratepayers to the cost of continuing through stage 2 of the process, which was expected to cost around \$600,000. I believe the difficulty with this entire process will be how this government meets the challenge and proves to local governments who oppose amalgamation that they will benefit from it. How will the government prove and convince workers that there will not be a loss of jobs and work opportunities with the council for school leavers as well? How will the government prove to ratepayers that they will not be adversely impacted, be that by an increase in rates, in other charges or feeling disengaged by the distancing of their council representatives?

As members know, local councillors are very accessible to their constituents. They are literally at the coalface of any problems that arise. Generally, people resent any tampering with their ability to communicate with their member at any level of government. I know Nanango council has decided to do away with council ward representatives in favour of whole of shire representatives, which has not been looked upon very favourably at all and has upset many of the local residents.

Queenslanders, perhaps more so than other states, love having a say on matters, and the proposed shire referendum regarding the amalgamation issue has been snatched from those whom it most affects. I do not believe the removal of the right to have a say will be accepted readily by the general populace, especially as it is being given into the hands of seven individuals. Even though they are capable individuals, they are seven individuals whose decisions really cannot be challenged.

I find the importance of matters addressed by this bill on its introduction some time ago have been wiped away by the late introduction of amendments regarding amalgamation. I doubt the idea of forced amalgamations is a recent thing, and I question why the amendments were not included in the bill initially. As I have said and outlined before, I think the reasons were purely motivated by political goals.

Foisting these amendments upon the parliament in the last couple of days speaks strongly of a government trying to avoid a lengthy confrontation in the media between councils, government and communities throughout Queensland. As mentioned earlier, there are a lot of questions that councils and the communities at large need answers to. Although I actually do support amalgamation of shires that willingly opt to do so, I believe that answers are needed and assurances need to be given to smaller councils, particularly in rural Queensland, that they will not receive a decline in services. At this point I do not support the bill.