



Developers urge more mergers

Morgan Mellish and Lisa Allen

Big property developers are pushing for more council amalgamations across Sydney after the forced merger of Sydney City and South Sydney councils.

The merger, which was rushed through by the NSW government on Friday, means that Labor is all but certain of controlling the planning approval process between the Sydney Opera House and Sydney airport, a distance of about 15 kilometres.

The Property Council of Australia, which represents real estate owners and investors, has called for more amalgamations of Sydney's moribund local councils, saying they are too inefficient.

"Essentially the whole eastern part of Sydney needs examination, including the North Shore, inner west, eastern suburbs, and Botany Bay," PCA executive director Ken Morrison

said.

"Bigger clearly is better. You get a community dividend to reinvest back into local infrastructure from savings from redundant senior staff and duplication of plant," he said.

Australia's third-largest property group, Mirvac, also supports the merger because local interest groups will have less influence over a bigger council. "Small councils often make decisions on the basis of small pressure groups," managing director Bob Hamilton said. "A big council like Brisbane Council [is] the most efficient in Australia. Things there are decided on their merits. It's not a council that's scared of 30 votes."

However, he conceded there was the possibility of more confusion over planning rules.

"They have different rules in South Sydney than they do in the city. It's crazy," he said. "If we build a block of apartments in Kings Cross, there's a certain number of

car parks allowed. Around the corner it's a different rule."

The Labor Party's power grab has angered veteran real estate developer Sid Londish. "The logic of the merger between Sydney Council and South Sydney Council does not add up," he said. "But the Labor Party wants it because it means power. All political parties do it, not just the Labor Party.

"A merger doesn't mean a great deal of difference to property developers. We are still dealing with government authorities, planners and councillors. Nothing changes: [the level of authority] just gets bigger," Mr Londish said.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects also opposes the merger.

The institute's NSW president, Caroline Pidcock, said the rejuvenation of the CBD in recent years could be jeopardised by any amalgamation.