

## Red tape risk in council mergers

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**UNCLEAR:** Belinda Moharich says there is potential for confusion in the planned council amalgamations. *Photo: Attila Csaszar*



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**The state government's proposed council amalgamations were framed in terms of increasing efficiency, but could make life more difficult for developers.**

The Barnett government's plans to halve the number of local councils have the potential to create administrative headaches and add to red tape for developers, planning experts have warned.

Premier Colin Barnett announced last week that the number of metropolitan local councils would be slashed from 30 to 14 from July 2015, with each of the new local governments to serve a future population of around 100,000.

The plans have been met with hostility from a number of existing local councils, with Mr Barnett accused of breaking an election promise that there would be no forced mergers.

While the property industry has praised the reforms, Flint Moharich director Belinda Moharich said it was clear the new local governments would face challenges in terms of handling planning applications.

Ms Moharich said that, until new local planning schemes were prepared, some new councils

would be responsible for administering several planning schemes at once.

"It's going to be very confusing I think," Ms Moharich told *Business News*.

The new western suburbs local government, for example, would have at least five planning schemes to deal with.

The process of creating and adopting a new local planning scheme was likely to take local governments "at least two and a half to three years", Ms Moharich said.

She said that preparing a new planning scheme would generally require local governments to hire consultants, advertise the new scheme to voters, receive and consider submissions from stakeholders, and then adopt the scheme, which must then go before the WA Planning Commission and the planning minister for final approval.

Developers seeking planning approvals before that time may be in for headaches, she said.

"Under the way that planning schemes operate at the moment, each local government has its own set of use-class definitions," Ms Moharich said.

"In one local government area you might have the definition of showroom which might include the sale of stationery and paper. You might then walk across the road to the next local government area and it will expressly exclude those sorts of things.

"It's a problem for retailers as it is but it will become, I imagine, even more administratively difficult when you've got the same local government administering five different schemes that actually have different definitions for the same type of use."

An experienced planning lawyer and qualified town planner, Ms Moharich said there were also likely to be teething issues with the administration of development contribution plans and the management of planning documents.

She said the government still hadn't dealt with the red tape created by an excessive amount of local planning schemes, but conceded it would be a significant task.

Urbis director Karen Wright said she had advised clients to factor in the potential for additional delays as a result of the amalgamations into their planning.

Ms Wright said the only way the process of establishing new local planning schemes could be accelerated is if local councils were willing to cooperate and begin planning immediately.

"If they resent the process and they don't collaborate then they're only going to start from the day that the legislation comes in and makes them do it and from there, you would definitely be looking at another three years," she said.

A spokesperson for the Department of Local Government and Communities said it would be up to the new local governments to determine how to administer local planning schemes and development contributions.