

Independent panels Proposal 'a real step backwards'

Move to strip councils of DA power slammed

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NSW Opposition Leader Luke Foley has accused the Berejiklian government of sidelining local communities following revelations of a move to strip councils of the power to determine development applications above a particular value.

Under the change, revealed by Fairfax Media on Tuesday, it would be mandatory for all metropolitan councils to use independent panels to determine applications above a certain value and possibly where a councillor has a pecuniary interest.

It is understood that for some regional councils, use of the panels would be voluntary.

The move is being viewed within the government as a probity measure it hopes will trump Mr Foley's call for developers to be banned from election to councils due to a conflict of interest.

Details of the reform, including the threshold value of an application that would trigger a referral, are due to be considered by the cabinet on Thursday.

But Mr Foley told ABC Radio the Coalition came to office promising to return planning powers to local communities, but had proceeded to sack councils and appoint administrators under a policy of forced mergers. "Now this," he said. "I think it's just confirmation that the government's suburban overdevelopment agenda is running rampant without any reference to local community sentiment."

He repeated his call for property developers and real estate agents to be banned from holding office in local government.

Greens MLC David Shoebidge agreed and warned the reform would be "a real step backwards for the NSW planning system".

"This is yet another example of the Coalition government stripping democratically elected councils of their decision-making and authority," he said.

Mr Shoebidge said councils "would be allowed to hand-pick a group of people from the property industry to make decisions about development applications".

"To suggest that these proposed

changes are probity and integrity measures is blatantly disingenuous spin from the Minister for Planning. If the Coalition was serious about restoring integrity to our planning system, they would start by banning property developers and real estate agents from sitting on council."

However, Chris Johnson, chief executive of developer group Urban Taskforce Australia, said mandatory referral to planning panels "will take the politics out of decision-making".

Mr Johnson also called for reforms to how regional planning panels dealt with projects worth more than \$20 million.

Planning Minister Anthony Roberts declined to comment directly on the proposal. But he said the panels, known as independent hearing and assessment panels, "are already working in some local government areas very successfully, where they're a valuable probity and integrity measure to ensure we have the best planning approval regime possible".

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