

Councils in \$20m cull compo bid

EXCLUSIVE
PETER LAW

THE Barnett Government's botched plan to slash the number of councils in Perth has cost ratepayers almost \$20 million.

The bill includes consultancy, legal, and publicity expenses, plus the cost of tens of thousands of hours in council staff time.

Most councils are now considering submitting a combined multimillion-dollar compensation claim to the State Government.

The WA Local Government Association has offered to facilitate the joint bid to recoup "reasonable" costs.

It comes as Cabinet tomorrow decides whether to rescind the Governor's orders for boundary changes due to come into effect on July 1.

A survey by *The Sunday Times* this week found 21 councils estimate Premier Colin Barnett's failed local government

reform cost at least \$17 million. A fraction of this was covered by government grants and the final bill will be higher as some councils did not include the cost of staff time. A further five councils are still calculating their costs.

The sum also does not include State Government costs, which Labor suggested is another \$20 million.

Cockburn, which led calls for compensation, says planning for its merger with Kwinana cost \$2.9 million, including \$2.2 million in staff time.

The next highest was at Swan (\$2.2 million), Fremantle (\$1.4 million), Mundaring (\$1.25 million), Melville (\$1.1 million), Bayswater (\$1 million) and South Perth (\$1 million).

Even small councils incurred big bills, including Peppermint Grove (\$240,000) and Mosman Park (\$500,000), which together have less than 10,000 ratepayers.

Mr Barnett's plan to cut the

number of metropolitan councils from 30 to 16 was dumped after communities given the chance to vote rejected the forced mergers.

South Perth, which spent \$65,000 on court action with Subiaco and Serpentine Jarrahdale, will this week consider a compensation claim.

Belmont, Melville, Stirling and Fremantle are among other councils to confirm they will seek to recoup costs.

Some councils argue they should be reimbursed through the \$15 million set aside by the State Government to fund the reform. The City of Perth, now likely the only council whose boundaries will change, estimates its costs are at least \$650,000, excluding staff time.

Local Government Minister Tony Simpson was unavailable for interview this week ahead of tomorrow's Cabinet meeting.

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