

**'ABANDON MERGERS'**

# Support for councils reform plan evaporates

**Kate Emery and Gareth Parker**

The State Government has lost one of its last allies in council reform as frustrated Liberal backbenchers prepare to demand an explanation from Colin Barnett over concerns that proposed mergers have been badly mishandled.

The WA Local Government Association yesterday added its voice to those calling for the Government to abandon its reform plans.

WALGA president Troy Pickard said weekend polls that led to three planned amalgamations collapsing meant the reform process had "unravelled to such an extent" it could no longer support it. "We are calling on the State Government to abandon this process and reverse the Governor's orders," he said.

At the same time there was talk MPs might demand votes be given to all councils subject to mergers because of a fear that the current plan made the Government look undemocratic.

The backbench could also urge the Premier to abandon the reform plan.

MPs yesterday expressed a degree of sympathy for Local Government Minister Tony Simpson, saying they felt he had not been empowered to progress reform, which was instead being steered by Mr Barnett.

"Tony's been hung out to dry," one MP said.

Mr Simpson said he was listening to feedback but did not indicate what action the Government was considering. He said he would brief colleagues and "work our way from there".

It is expected to be discussed at a two-day Liberal Party meeting in Busselton starting today.

South Metropolitan MLC Simon O'Brien and South Perth

MP John McGrath have called for all ratepayers whose councils are flagged for mergers to be given a vote. Mr O'Brien went further, saying reform should be dumped. Mr Simpson did not say what would happen to 13,000 City of Canning ratepayers technically left without a council. Although most of Canning is to be absorbed by the City of Gosnells, a slice of it was to go to a combined City of South Perth-Town of Victoria

Park, which was rejected by ratepayers.

Also yesterday Fremantle mayor Brad Pettitt took a swipe at what he said was the Government's failure to be vocal about the benefits of amalgamation.

"It left a void of inaccurate negativity that made the No votes outnumbering the Yes votes inevitable," he said.

■ **OPINION P19**



**Process unravelled: Troy Pickard**



**Engagement off: City of Fremantle and East Fremantle will not be joined after ratepayers rejected an amalgamation.**