

MERCURY

Councils Act a smart idea

THE creation of a Greater Hobart Act that puts into law a formal working relationship between the four councils that serve the residents of our capital city is an eminently sensible idea.

The fact that there are four distinct and independent councils in a city of 230,000 people is a situation you can't help feeling sometimes holds us back — with proper co-ordination relating to transport, housing and other planning issues really just reliant on goodwill between those in charge in each of the neighbouring jurisdictions.

By all accounts, we are fortunate at the moment because the senior leadership of the four councils (including Glenorchy) have a strong working relationship. But formalising an arrangement would future-proof that relationship — meaning that no matter who the four mayors (or commissioners!) and the four general managers are, by law they would have to work together.

The creation of a new government organisation charged with co-ordinating the planning and development of our capital city therefore seems a good middle-ground option between doing nothing and a shock-and-awe full amalgamation (which, we note, would result in a benefit of \$383 million over 20 years — a saving so big that perhaps it's a concept that should not be totally shelved).

Now, as with any proposal in its early days, there are plenty of questions still to be answered when it comes to this idea of a formal councils partnership.

And the obvious first one is that we would need to ensure this new organisation doesn't just create a new bureaucracy. That's the last thing Tasmania needs.

It may be a generation or more before we have another chance to take advantage of the opportunities ahead of us right now to really take Hobart to where it can be.

Each council would therefore have to agree to give up some staff numbers to the new body, so that costs do not blow out — and so ratepayers are not left with any additional burden.

The new Greater Hobart Commission — or whatever it ends up being named — would also have to have some pretty strict guidelines attached to it around performance, to ensure it is actually doing something for the people of Hobart rather than just talking about it.

But the *Mercury* is supportive of the concept.

As Clarence Mayor Doug Chipman says, a Greater Hobart Commission may also not just lead to better co-ordination around transport and planning issues — which is vital — but also to benefits in terms of more grants and government assistance for the councils, and therefore ratepayers.

It's only through working together — and successfully winning government assistance — that big and important projects such as a proposed integrated ferries system or the light rail can have a realistic chance of actually getting built.

This is a vital time in the history of Tasmania, and of our capital city. It may be a generation or more before we have another chance to take advantage of the opportunities ahead of us right now to really take Hobart to where it can be.

Thinking big is therefore important. But thinking creatively is also vital. That's the case when it comes to how best to develop our city. It's the case when it comes to developing tourism in our regions. And it's certainly the case when it comes to how best to ensure our council structure is the right one for the times.