

Get wise and we'll all pay less

25 October 2018

3 min. read

[local government](#) / [councillor](#) / [unqualified](#) / [community](#) / [planning](#) / [elected members](#) / [opinion](#) / [The West Australian](#)

Local government is big business with assets worth over \$40 billion under the control of community-minded people largely unqualified for the role. With an increasingly sophisticated community requiring a higher standard of decision making it's a nonsense to think that councillors with no education in financial reporting, budgeting and rate-setting, long-term financial planning and town planning approvals are best placed to make high quality, informed decisions.

Then there's the issue of who would volunteer. State Government demands more from councils than ever before with few additional resources; the community derides the service they receive, but don't want to pay more to improve it; and those seeking to serve on councils receive little to no training to manage the workload.

Councillors face immediate repercussions with any difficult or controversial decision copping it from angry ratepayers, local newspapers and proponents who disagree with the decision. Any nervous councillor only needs a few experiences with difficult decisions to know what to do next time. Nothing. Especially when local activist groups, frequently fuelled by self-interest disguised as community spirit, gain enough momentum to exert undue influence. It is when elected members shirk their decision-making responsibilities to pass them up to another decision-making body, such as the State Administrative Tribunal (SAT), that we see what councillors are wearing when the tide goes out.

The discussion paper which accompanied the State Government's first phase of local government reforms is worth revisiting. It refers to the tense relationship between councils and the administration, the executives and officers who do the heavy lifting in local government.

Many councillors simply do not know the difference between what appropriate lobbying is and when that lobbying crosses the line. For example, a fast food chain might apply to build a new outlet, Locals fill the public gallery in council chambers to object on various but frequently predictable grounds. There are little to no rules for local advocacy groups, who can say whatever they wish in whichever forum they choose. And they do, derailing projects or forcing council to make a non-decision. With a nod to the ratepayers, a council might turn down a fully compliant proposal.

In many cases it goes to SAT, appropriate concessions are offered and accepted, and the proposal is approved. The council could have extracted the concessions themselves. An appeal to the SAT is a financial drain. The public pays twice because the SAT is State Government-funded. And the proponent is left with the expense of an unnecessary process in a no cost jurisdiction.

It would cost an eight-member council approximately \$68,000 for all elected members to attend a course. Compare that to taking just one decision to a half-day SAT hearing with legal costs of around \$151,000 and then a further \$130,000 if it is appealed.

Investing in education would benefit the community more and lead to less waste. Local government will only implement mandatory continuous education for elected members if forced to. Those serving in local government deserve our every effort to ensure they are capable of making the decisions we demand of them. Education for councillors is essential. Continuing, relevant, education is vital.

(As printed in The West Australian - 24 October 2018)

25 October 2018

[local government](#) / [councillor](#) / [unqualified](#) / [community](#) / [planning](#) / [elected members](#) / [opinion](#) / [The West Australian](#)

[Previous article](#) [Next article](#)