

The Wrap



BIGGER ROLE: *Local governments have expanded their responsibilities*

Referendum vital for council funding

Push for recognition of local government.

A parliamentary committee has called for a referendum to be held at the federal election this year to ensure the Commonwealth is able to directly fund local government.

The committee report found there was a strong case for financial recognition of local government in the Constitution, which would remove uncertainty around federally funded local government programs such as Roads to Recovery.

The validity of these programs has been cast into doubt by recent High Court judgements questioning the constitutional basis for their direct federal funding.

Chair of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government, Michelle Rowland (Greenway, NSW) said constitutional recognition is needed to allow local governments to continue to provide the wide array of services that many people take for granted.

“The days of local government doing just roads, rates and rubbish are long gone,” Ms Rowland said. “Local governments are now recognised by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments as ideally positioned to both deliver services and to advocate for their communities.

“Over the past century, local governments have progressively

expanded their roles and responsibilities, and this trend will only continue.”

However Coalition members of the committee released a dissenting report, claiming there is not enough time to build support for a successful referendum on the issue before the next election, scheduled for 14 September 2013.

They accused the government of not acting quickly enough on the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government, which released its final report in December 2011.

“As a direct consequence, the time remaining between now and 14 September 2013 is likely to be insufficient to put in place the necessary mechanics, education campaigns and other measures highlighted by expert witnesses as necessary to ensure an informed outcome for the referendum question,” the dissenting report states.

But Ms Rowland said prospects for success are strong due to existing bipartisan support at the federal level for direct funding of local government and the readiness of the Australian Local Government Association and individual local governments to campaign in support of change.

“The committee has carefully considered the difficult question of ‘the likelihood of success’ of a proposed referendum, and the committee’s major finding reflects the evidence that we received during the inquiry,” she said.

“We have found that the referendum has a good prospect of success, and we note that the support of state governments would greatly improve that prospect. Based on this finding, the committee believes that this referendum should go ahead in 2013.”

The federal government has yet to formally respond to the report or indicate whether a referendum on the matter will be held at this year’s federal election. •

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