

# Concerns at powers given to mayors

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Emergency powers given to mayors to deal with the coronavirus pandemic risk undemocratic decision-making, local councillors are warning.

The City of Sydney, Woollahra Municipal Council and Georges River Council are among the NSW councils that have voted to delegate some decision-making to mayors.

Sydney lord mayor Clover Moore was given powers this month to make some decisions, such as entering contracts worth up to \$10 million, in “emergency situations”.

Craig Chung, a Liberal councillor on the City of Sydney, said the power delegated by the council to Cr Moore was “unprecedented and very concerning”.

“I don’t want, under the cover of an emergency, for the elected council to be sidestepped to allow unfettered and irreversible decision-making to rest in one person,” he said.

A council spokesman said Cr Moore’s new powers, which she is yet to use, would be reviewed on June 30 and followed a request from the state government to all councils to review emergency powers.

“The delegations ensure that decisions can be made quickly in response to any developments outside of the normal council meeting cycle,” he said.

Local Government Minister Shelley Hancock said there was no longer any impediment to councils meeting to make decisions after the law was amended to permit electronic council meetings.

David Shoebridge, the Greens local government spokesman, said online council meetings had resolved many of the reasons for giving emergency powers to mayors. “Councillors should be very careful about giving excessive powers to any one person, even in a crisis.”

Georges River mayor Kevin Greene has used powers delegated to him to comply with public health orders between council meetings.

Cr Chung said residents and ratepayers should be concerned

about decision-making power in the hands of one person “especially when the Lord Mayor used her casting vote to give herself the additional power”.

“History tells us that during times of crisis and emergency, governments are not beyond giving themselves unprecedented powers over the community and outside the inspection of the elected body and without review,” he said.

Woollahra’s Liberal mayor Susan Wynne was also delegated powers to make decisions not expressly excluded by law if she considers it is necessary for the health and safety of the local community, council staff or the wider public.

A council spokesman said the emergency delegated powers would last until September unless revoked earlier by the council.

“The powers only relate to managing COVID-19-related issues because of the urgency that some decisions require, and do not extend to normal council decision-making processes,” he said.

But independent councillor Harriet Price said the mayor did not need emergency powers following new rules permitting electronic council meetings.

“Most truly urgent measures relating to restriction on movement and other urgent public safety measures are governed by other levels of government,” she said. “So one must ask, what is the utility of giving such delegation to the mayor.”

Cr Price also expressed concern about a reduction in the number of council meetings. “Even more so in a time of crisis.”