

Inquiry call on spending

By DENISE PIPER

Ratepayers are being told to use their voting power if they do not like the amount of money being spent on local government options in Northland.

But two Northland regional councillors believe there needs to be a ministerial inquiry or auditor-general investigation because of the money spent on lies and half truths.

All three Northland district councils spent \$80,000 on the McKinlay Douglas report on local government options for Northland.

The report recommends one or two unitary authorities to replace Northland's current two-tier council system, and two unitary authorities have been favoured by the Whangarei and Far

North mayors. The Whangarei District Council has spent a further \$9400 on a peer review by Greg Innes.

Both the Whangarei and Far North District Council have also distributed to households a separate promotional pamphlet on the options and are co-ordinating public consultation.

But the regional council, through an Official Information Act request, has found that the McKinlay Douglas report has been predetermined and rewritten.

In the correspondence, report author Peter McKinlay admits the report has been written to focus on concerns about the regional council, that reorganisation will cost more than the current system and that the Far North is unlikely to be financially able to form a unitary authority

on its own. He also admits serious concerns have been omitted, such as cost and what to do with assets.

Earlier drafts recommend a single unitary authority or possibly enhancing the status quo, saying two unitary authorities is the least favoured option. The regional council has also found flaws in the promotional pamphlets, particularly a claim by the Far North that ratepayers could save money if part of a unitary authority.

Northland regional councillor Ian Walker says there should be a ministerial inquiry.

"There should be some very embarrassed people and a very embarrassed consultant who's obviously a hired gun who writes what people want to see."

Mr Walker says the

process has been bad for democracy.

"This process is a very good example of bad practice of local government. Any changes to democracy should be done in full view of the media and the public."

But Local Government Minister Rodney Hide refuses to be drawn on whether the process is a waste of money, saying it is up to councillors how council money is spent. Voters and ratepayers can cast their judgement this October, he says.

Mr Hide says amalgamation like Auckland's supercity will not be forced onto other districts.

However, he says the government will put out a discussion document next year on the Local Government Act, giving councils options for amalgamation and unitary authorities.