

# Bid to breathe new life into council

**Mark Fenton-Jones**

The recently reappointed Small Business Council plans to put the minutes of its meetings on a website, a move that should go some way to reducing the criticism of its relevance and its role in the wider small business community.

"It is important for us to be transparent and minimise people questioning if we are doing a good job," council chairwoman Kym Tunbridge said.

The council, which will hold its first meeting of the year on March 10, is now into its second year. But for much of the first, it was an unknown quantity for industry associations that have been lobbying the government on issues worrying their small business members.

Margy Osmond, chief executive officer of the NSW State Chamber of Commerce, said she had not seen evidence of changes to the government's small business policy to reflect concerns such as the red tape burden since the SBC was set up.

"When the council was announced, the state chamber warned that without broader consultation, small business owners could end up shortchanged," Ms Osmond said.

"The government needs to look further than a dozen assorted businesses on its Small Business Council if it is to effect real change that will benefit small businesses across the country."

Ms Osmond called for a widespread commitment to consultation and a real timetable for change.

"Hands-on industry groups like state chambers, who consult their membership regularly, have a key part to play in that process," she said.

Tony Stevens, the deputy chairman of the Council of Small Business Organisations of Australia, whose membership comprises 27 associations, said major concerns included choice of superannuation and the continuing red tape. "And we're very concerned that we have real input into any ideas [the federal government] have

on industrial relations reforms," he said.

"I see us as the representative body of hundreds of thousands of small businesses. The SBC's role is being a sounding board for the minister, whereas if the minister wants to talk to real representation, COSBOA can do that."

Unlike her predecessor, Joe Hockey, new federal Small Business

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Minister Fran Bailey wants the SBC to be more targeted on issues it provides feedback on, an aim Ms Tunbridge favours. "I'd like to have fewer topics but more time to delve into them," she said.

While the SBC will function along similar lines as it did under Mr Hockey, identifying issues and setting up working groups to provide recommendations to the minister, Ms

Bailey wants council members to tap into their business networks.

"We've always been encouraged to speak to others around us but not probably as actively," Ms Tunbridge said. "Minister Bailey seems to really be asking us to go out and speak to other people while Minister Hockey was probably more interested in getting the issues on the table and getting recommendations happening and moving."

The federal Labor spokesman on small business, Tony Burke, wants to see a home-based business member on the council, an issue he was to take up with the Department of Small Business at a meeting yesterday. "It's an area of rapid growth and it's an area the government legislation on home-based business which has come out so far has failed to understand," he said.

Mr Burke criticised the structure of the government's 25 per cent entrepreneur tax discount for giving a benefit to home-based businesses with no input costs over those with high input costs.