

NEWS

Councils told ignore debate

By **Ben Brennan**

COUNCILS have been told to pull back from the local government referendum debate because engaging in politics would prove "toxic" with voters.

A leaked email from Local Government Association of South Australia (LGASA) communications director Chris Russell to councils revealed it was urging its members not to engage with politicians because research indicated it would prove a turn off for voters.

"As a result of this early feedback we are now deliberately not responding to any requests to respond to politicians or to the no campaign and we would suggest that you encourage your mayors and council members to do the same," the letter read.

The revelation comes after former Howard Government minister Nick Minchin, who believes Australia should vote against the move, was invited to a question and answer

session hosted by the Lower Murray Liberal

Party branch at Tailem Bend on Thursday.

Murray Bridge Mayor Allan Arbon was originally slated to deliver a "yes" case in response and Coorong Mayor Roger Strother was a planned replacement when Mayor Arbon pulled out in the lead-up to the talk.

With no one to argue against, Mr Minchin delivered his "no" case unopposed to the 25 branch members and business people at the Riverside Hotel.

State Member for Hammond Adrian Pederick was in the

crowd and said he was disappointed local government leaders had snubbed the event and he believed the no-show could be related to the gag order.

"It was very disappointing that no one from local government was there but that seems to be the Local Government Association's response," Mr Pederick said.

"I think that's a very, very bad move."

Mr Pederick said it

was unfortunate that proponents of the "yes" case had pulled back from democratic

debates, especially given their campaign had received \$10 million of taxpayer funding compared to about \$500,000 for the "no" campaign.

Mayor Arbon told The Standard that he pulled out of the debate because it would be inappropriate for him to speak in Mayor Strother's council area, while Mayor Strother said he was committed to another engagement.

"(But) I'm quite happy to be involved in debates like that but until we're sure there's going to be a referendum there probably isn't a lot of point," Mayor Strother said.

Both mayors confirmed they had been urged by LGASA not to engage in political debates on the subject.

The Standard contacted the LGASA but its chief executive officer Wendy Campana said she did not wish to comment.