

## **IMINTJI COMMUNITY — PROPOSED AIRSTRIP**

### *Statement*

**HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral)** [9.47 pm]: I want to talk about the Imintji airstrip. The almost tragic helicopter accident at Imintji community on 12 May this year has raised a number of concerns, including the delays in establishing the Imintji airstrip. The helicopter accident on 12 May occurred at 11.00 am and resulted in four people requiring medical attention. Only by chance was a medical team in the area. The team was travelling with the Gibb River Road mountain bike challenge and was able to render assistance. Next time accident victims might not be as lucky. I understand that the pilot received internal injuries, a fractured hip and spinal injuries and was airlifted to Broome District Hospital by helicopter from the site of the accident. The other three passengers sustained back and neck injuries and had to endure a road trip to Mt Barnett. Anyone who has travelled that road will understand the discomfort that would have been endured by those accident victims. They were eventually evacuated from Mt Barnett at 7.00 pm that evening, arriving in Derby to be hospitalised at around 8.00 pm. That, in my view and in the view of the people of that community in the Kimberley, is a long time for anyone who has been involved in an accident to receive appropriate medical attention. The Imintji community is situated about 220 kilometres east of Derby along the very popular Gibb River Road and is fast emerging as a remote service centre for those who travel along the Gibb River Road and for the surrounding Indigenous communities. Apparently the community provides housing and a store, which includes fuel services, Centrelink services and access to a health clinic with regular visits from medical teams. It has a Kimberley wilderness adventure camp nearby and increasingly is becoming a stopover for tour operators and tourists. Imintji is cut off from any access to an airstrip and other services during the wet season when the roads are closed. Community members remain in the community and are completely isolated for long periods during the wet season.

I will give a bit of the history of the building of the airstrip at Imintji. The project began between 2001 and 2003, when discussions were undertaken and a concept plan for an airstrip was developed. The Centre for Appropriate Technology in Derby was approached by the state government to be the contract manager for the project, and funding was sought by the Centre for Appropriate Technology from the state and federal governments. After a considerable amount of time and lobbying, it was able to access various state and federal agencies for this funding. It took a while; nevertheless, it achieved its aims and got enough funding. Following this, tenders were awarded to construct the airstrip. However, work has been delayed due to landownership issues and airstrip maintenance responsibilities. As I understand it, the land where the airstrip is proposed to be constructed is managed by the Kimberley pastoral board, which leases the land to Mt House station. The Kimberley pastoral board would prefer that the land was excised from the lease and incorporated into the Imintji community reserve, and that Imintji become responsible for the maintenance of the airstrip. Mt House station agrees with the proposal to build the airstrip, but is not prepared to sell, transfer or assign the land to the Imintji community. It has stated that it does not want the maintenance responsibility; it wants the airstrip fenced, which is quite appropriate, and, of course, it wants access to the airstrip at all times. Although there is no dedicated funding for maintenance at present, the Imintji community is suitably equipped and prepared to carry out all regular maintenance, such as slashing, mowing, cone maintenance, removal of anthills etc.

The Winun Ngari Aboriginal Corporation has included in its 2008-09 budget for community development employment projects sufficient funding to undertake this task. It hopes it will be able to offer to do the maintenance grade at minimal cost to the contractor that currently does the annual Main Roads WA opening grade of Gibb River Road, which is done just after the wet season is finished. I understand that the Kimberley pastoral board referred the matter of the land excise process to the Department of Land Information. This department considered the matter for a number of months and, for reasons that do not make sense to anybody who has been involved in the issue, returned the question of the land excise process to the Centre for Appropriate Technology and advised it to create a sublease or user agreement between all parties for the use of the land as an airstrip and for responsibility for the maintenance of the airstrip. This has created its own problems, as the Centre for Appropriate Technology has funding for only the construction of the airstrip; it does not have the funds, or even the expertise, to negotiate these sorts of legal agreements. The question that needs to be answered on this sublease is: who is responsible for initialising the creation of the sublease? It is quite clearly not the responsibility of the Centre for Appropriate Technology in Derby; nor should it be the responsibility of the Imintji community or Mt House station. I suggest that it is the responsibility of the relevant state government department; that is, the Department of Land Information should probably deal with the matter.

As a result of all the confusion about who should be responsible, the project has stalled and the ongoing future viability and safety of the Imintji community and others in the area are in jeopardy. This government constantly states that it wants to assist the Indigenous people of Western Australia, especially those who live in remote communities. Given these stated commitments, I urge the state government to urgently intervene in this matter so that construction of the new airstrip at Imintji can commence immediately. By “immediately”, I mean now

during the dry season, when it is a little easier to travel to and from this community. As we all know, during the wet season the chance of travelling up and down Gibb River Road is almost nil, so the state government needs to intervene now and assist this Indigenous community to get on its feet and get its airstrip.