

“SUPERTOWNS” INITIATIVE

Statement

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [8.32 pm]: I rise to speak about the “Supertowns” initiative that was funded in this year’s state budget. I would particularly like to talk about the launch of one of the “Supertowns” in my electorate, Northam. On Friday, the Minister for Regional Development, Hon Max Trenorden and I attended the public launch of the “Supertowns” initiative in Northam. Members may be aware of the process around the initiative. There was an evaluative process through the nine regional development commissions, through which various towns throughout the southern part of the state were nominated, and it was recently announced that the towns of Northam, Katanning, Jurien Bay and Morawa in the Agricultural Region—the region that I represent—are four of the nine towns that have been selected. It was not a competitive process, so towns could not lobby the minister or the department. It was done through the regional development commissions with various growth indicators. They were then put up to the Regional Development Council for consideration.

The basis of the initiative is really around future planning for population growth. With this state looking at considerable population growth in coming years, problems could be posed for the Perth metropolitan area if we, as the government, do not address regional growth. Therefore, we need growth plans for some of our regional centres. I am not a member for the metropolitan region, but I am aware of councils in the metropolitan region and members who represent the metropolitan region who have to face the issue of residents and councils shying away from the densification of their suburbs through high-rise construction or further subdivision. I know that issue is dealt with regularly in the Perth metropolitan area. I am aware that one city council recently knocked on the head a proposal to build a six-storey retirement village and aged-care facility in its area. In my part of the world, the Agricultural Region, we would have the red carpet out and the palm fronds in place if someone wanted to come and build something like that. Unfortunately, the reality is that people in the Perth metropolitan area do not want that kind of development in their backyard. On top of the densification and subdivision issue, there is also the fact that people do not want to see further urban sprawl, so the Minister for Environment and others are trying to deal with urban encroachment onto the outskirts of the metropolitan region. This leaves us in something of a dilemma as a state government planning for growth in this state.

The numbers we are talking about are not National Party numbers; we have not made them up to make our towns want to get bigger, and they are not Hon Brendon Grylls’ numbers. They are actually the statistics used by demographers and population experts to talk about assisting state governments to plan for their future growth. We are in a very lucky position in Western Australia; we have areas of the state that have good, strong economic drivers and reasons to move to various parts of the state. Through royalties for regions, we are trying to address some of the problems that prevent people from making that decision, and part of the “Supertowns” initiative comes from that.

I put it to members that if people living in the Perth metropolitan area already have a problem with subdivisions, densification and urban sprawl, and that they are already concerned about lack of amenities in the suburbs that are further out from the more established suburbs and about congestion on our roads—I know that many studies have been done in recent times about the impact of congestion on productivity, such as the one released by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia—we really are going to have a problem, because this growth is going to happen. When we look around Australia, we see that other states have regional centres such as Bendigo, Ballarat and Broken Hill, and we quickly realise that Western Australia really does not have the equivalent.

The “Supertowns” initiative is really about having a go at planning for that growth. I have been keeping note of some of the comments the opposition has made about this, and it is actually far from a case of, “build it and they will come,” which is not really a sustainable or sound plan for a responsible government to have. The “Supertowns” that have been identified have various indicators underpinning real economic activity that can sustain a growing population. It may be no surprise to members that I do not have any desire to see towns overflowing with people who do not have jobs; otherwise, I would be attending more meetings like the one I attended last night in Goomalling, with Neighbourhood Watch. Unemployment necessarily flows on to increases in crime and things that are undesirable, so I have no desire to see that in any part of my community.

To return to Northam, Hon Max Trenorden and I attended the public launch of the initiative. There were local residents, representatives of the Shire of Northam, and representatives from the surrounding shires in attendance to hear about what the initiative would mean for them. A strong part of the minister’s address was around the importance of the super town—in this case, Northam—embracing its neighbours and including them in the process. There has been some concern in our community about us perhaps picking winners to the exclusion of some of our smaller communities. That could not be further from the truth because there is absolutely no point in a town like Northam being a regional centre without its neighbours actually seeing it as their true regional centre. If people drive straight through to Perth, it is not going to be a super town. It really is in the interest of Northam,

Jurien Bay, Katanning and Morawa to engage closely with their neighbours, and I think that was on display at the public launch on Friday. There was good representation from the neighbouring communities, and I think that is a good start to the process. That is where it begins; they actually now start sitting down with the experts from the WA Planning Commission to work closely with members of the shire and various planning bodies within the shire to have a look at the plans they already have, and put them against new targets for growth, given that we will be looking at considerable growth and perhaps some towns have not done that planning. It assists them and provides them with the expertise to go through this process and engage with the key government agencies that will be required to take note of this along the way, to make sure that the Department of Education, the Water Corporation and other departments are actually in line with what this and other towns' aspirations are. It is a really important process. Although money was allocated in the budget, at the end of the day it is certainly not about getting their hands on the money; it is about the planning process and being ready for growth. I think that is a fantastic initiative. There was a great deal of positive feeling around in Northam on Friday, and I am sure that that will continue as we move through the regions and do the same with the Katannings and the Morawas and the remainder of them. It is a very positive initiative for not only the Agricultural Region, but also the regions in general, and I felt that it was relevant, given that we have metropolitan representatives in this house, that we noted the importance of this kind of planning for the Perth metropolitan region, because without it we will be in a great deal of trouble.