

BEENYUP WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT — CRAIGIE

Grievance

MR P.A. KATSAMBANIS (Hillarys) [9.39 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Water. I thank the minister for taking the grievance. The grievance is about an issue that is of significant concern to my constituents in the suburb of Craigie. As people know, the Beenyup wastewater plant has been operating in Craigie since 1970 in various forms. The plant was significantly upgraded in 1996. More recently, in 2016, stage 1 of the wastewater recycling plant was commissioned, and late in 2017, the Minister for Water announced that stage 2 of that important wastewater recycling plant would go ahead.

It is fair to say that when the plant started operation back in 1970, it was on the edges of suburbia and not anywhere near established housing. However, Perth's growth, particularly in the northern corridor, has meant that the plant is now located smack bang in the middle of suburbia. That obviously causes some issues. It is clear that the plant is necessary. It provides a vital link in Perth's wastewater strategy, in particular in wastewater recycling and replenishing the aquifer. The plant adds a lot of value to our water sources both now and for the future.

As the minister is aware, in recent times, particularly over the last year, there have been frequent periods in which significant odours and smells have emanated from that facility. Those odours and smells are a major source of concern for the residents of Craigie, and they have expressed their concerns to me as their parliamentary representative. The people in the local area have told me that they appreciate the role of the facility. They certainly appreciate the employment the plant generates and its strategic importance in treating Perth's wastewater. They understand that absolutely. However, that does not take away from the fact that they also deserve their wellbeing to be taken into consideration. They deserve the amenity and lifestyle that people expect in our suburbs. They do not need themselves and their families to be impacted by noxious odours and smells emanating from the plant. It is impacting on their lives and on their families. On many days, it impacts on their simple ability to go into their backyard or front yard or to their local park and play with their children.

Recently, during the latest spike in odours that was exhibited, I was contacted by some of the residents. One residents wrote, according to my notes —

The smell is very strong at times ... last night we could not even go outside. The smell came across our house around 6-7 pm. Even with the door slightly ajar the smell filled our house.

Another resident wrote —

This is not the first time in recent history this has happened and that a contingency plan should have been put in place to prevent this issue regardless of the crisis. This plant has a history of subjecting local residents to foul odours repeatedly in a relatively short period of time.

This issue is well above partisan politics. Governments of all stripes have made an investment in that facility over many years. We recognise that the plant needs to be there. We recognise the work that it does. My constituents have absolutely no interest in getting caught up in any sort of slanging match. They want the facility to function properly, without impacting the lives of themselves and their families.

I understand from recent media reports and from the minister's own correspondence to me on 11 May that a technical problem at the plant has been causing intermittent odours. I recognise that the travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have prevented the sourcing of equipment and specialist resources from overseas. Although it has been reported in the media, and I quote, that "these odours pose no risk to community health and safety", that is of little comfort to my constituents who have to put up with these noxious smells on a regular basis. They want the problem rectified. It is not an isolated incident. My constituents tell me that it happens regularly. One constituent even asked me why the Water Corporation is not fined for these sorts of things. One of the questions asked by the public is why is there no incentive for the Water Corporation to deal with this problem rather than allow the odours to persist.

I recognise that it is tough and that sourcing parts from overseas during this pandemic period is difficult. I ask the minister today for an update on the situation. Where is the Water Corporation currently at in sourcing the necessary equipment? What is the anticipated time frame to fix the current fault? How confident is the minister that this work will stop the emission of odours in the future? This is not a new thing. It is not occurring just because of the fault. It is a regular occurrence. I note that my colleague the shadow Minister for Water has asked questions about further expansions of the wastewater recycling plant. Does the minister have any update on that expansion and on how that might impact my local residents? What work is the Water Corporation doing to mitigate odours and bad smells from the plant? I also seek some recognition that the residents are being impacted and that work needs to be done urgently to fix the problem, and an assurance that any further expansions of the plant will not cause them to be worse off than they are at the moment. I thank the minister for taking the grievance and I look forward to the minister's answer.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water) [9.46 am]: I thank the member for Hillarys for raising this matter with me. I begin by assuring the member that the Water Corporation takes these issues extremely seriously. The Water Corporation manages over 100 wastewater treatment plants around the state. The Water Corporation spends literally millions of dollars each year trying to ensure that odour issues are dealt with as expeditiously and sensitively as possible. The fact that we get such a limited number of complaints about those 100 plants across Western Australia shows that, by and large, the Water Corporation is managing this issue reasonably well. Having said that, I certainly sympathise with the residents whom the member has spoken about today.

Over the last couple of months, there have been unusual odour issues at the Beenyup wastewater treatment plant. I certainly take those issues very seriously. As the member would be aware, the odours at the plant have been caused by the emission of unburnt waste gas. That has been the result of a series of unusual equipment failures, and that has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused delays for the Water Corporation in rectifying the issue.

As the member points out, although the odour issue poses no health risks, it nevertheless makes life unpleasant for the residents who live around that wastewater treatment plant. The member for Hillarys has noted the importance of this plant. The plant takes 35 per cent of the wastewater that is generated in the Perth metropolitan area. Therefore, the plant cannot be moved any time soon.

In November 2019, there was a technical issue with the inner layer of the plant's biogas storage balloon, which maintains a stable supply of gas to the burner. At the time of the fault, the Water Corporation communicated to the local community and advised of a potential time frame of approximately three months to rectify that problem. The Water Corporation, having become aware of a problem, could have tried to hide it, but, in fact, it sent out about 1 000 letters to local residents. The Water Corporation takes the view that it is better to be proactive than to try to hide these sorts of issues.

To fix the storage balloon, the Water Corporation was required to order a specialised part designed and built in Spain in late 2019. The balloon was installed in 2011. It was expected to have a shelf life of 25 years, so it was unusual when it failed when it did. Unfortunately, the issues were significantly compounded in March 2020, when the treatment plant's gas burners and blowers also began to fail. The burners and blowers began to fail intermittently. These multiple equipment failures, in conjunction with the storage balloon failure, led to gas being intermittently vented to the environment without being burnt, which is what causes the odour. Fortunately, the gas burners and blowers were able to be fixed locally. On 24 April 2020, repairs to the waste gas burners were completed, with the blowers to be repaired by 5 June 2020. Since bringing the waste gas burners back online, there have been no faults resulting in odorous gas being released from the plant. I am told that has significantly reduced the number of complaints.

The good news is that the balloon arrived in Perth on 26 May 2020. However, the installation of the new balloon is a specialised skill, and I am advised a technician is coming from Japan to do that work. Given that we now have a hard international border, the Water Corporation is working as quickly as possible to get international approvals so that the specialist technician from Japan can come to Western Australia as soon as possible. The member would be aware that once the technician gets here, he or she will have to spend two weeks in quarantine. I understand it will be at least a week's work for the installation. We are working as rapidly as we can to get the technician here to do the final repair work on the plant. As the member has heard, there have been multiple equipment failures that have occurred well in advance of the expected shelf life of that equipment, compounded by delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Water Corporation has put in place a special COVID-19 response unit to deal with these issues. This issue has been elevated to that group and the Water Corporation is working as quickly as possible to get that technician here. I understand that it anticipates that the work will be completed by the end of June, but that again depends on the arrival of the technician from Japan.

Finally, I want to make sure that the residents of the member's electorate are aware that these odour issues are in no way related to the aquifer recharge and wastewater recycling in place at the Beenyup wastewater treatment plant. I am advised that since November last year, the odour has been caused by this very unusual multiple equipment failure. I think we have scheduled a further briefing for the member next week. I am very happy to give the member what additional information we can provide. I want to assure the residents of the member's electorate that we take these issues very seriously. The Water Corporation constantly deals with odour issues around the state, and I assure the member that it does not stick its head in the sand, it takes these issues very seriously, and as a government we encourage it to do so.