

ASHFIELD FLATS — MANAGEMENT

Grievance

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean) [9.12 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Planning. I have spoken before in this Parliament about my concerns about the future and management of Ashfield Flats; that is why I rise today to speak again, by way of grievance, to the Minister for Planning. Before I start, I acknowledge the work done by the Bassendean Preservation Group led by Stephen McFarland, and supported by great workers such as Ted and Carlle Bentley; as recently as last Saturday they were down at Ashfield Flats planting hundreds of trees. AshfieldCAN, led by Lucy Bromell, is another group that has shown a great deal of interest in Ashfield Flats. We also have a river rangers group that works with the students of Bassendean Primary School. All those community groups care greatly about what happens to Ashfield Flats.

Ashfield Flats is an environmental and social gem, and the last remaining river flat in the metropolitan area. It is a 64-hectare Bush Forever site, and is listed in the “Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia”. I should not need to explain to the minister the environmental importance of Ashfield Flats. As well as being an important environmental asset, it is a great community asset. I have heard locals describe the footpath where people regularly walk along the foreshore as the main street of Ashfield; it is an area that people hold in very high regard for its public amenity.

However, it is an area that is under threat and not well managed. Despite the best efforts to date of well-meaning people at the Town of Bassendean, the Swan River Trust and the Western Australian Planning Commission, along with the efforts of the community groups I have already mentioned, Ashfield Flats’ future is not secure and the land is severely degraded. The particular issue that generated this grievance was the complaints I receive from locals about erosion on the foreshore, but erosion is not the only problem. The area is plagued by weeds, there is pollution, and there is boat wash, and in general the future of the area is not being well looked after. The community believes that urgent action is needed to immediately deal with some issues such as the erosion, but what is needed is a strategic management plan. This is where the minister comes in, because much of the land there is owned by the WA Planning Commission. I wrote to the minister on this issue, and the response was less than satisfactory. The minister acknowledged that there is not currently a long-term strategic management plan. In all the discussions I have had with various groups, the Town of Bassendean and the Swan River Trust, it always comes back to the same issue: the government is the landowner, the government must put together a plan and the government must deliver the money necessary.

Minister, it is plain wrong that the government has let this land degrade to its current state. It is environmental vandalism for the state government to allow Ashfield Flats to continue to be degraded because the government, as the landowner, refuses to put in place an adequately funded management plan. The Premier is willing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a piece of foreshore he calls Elizabeth Quay, yet for a fraction of the cost the Premier could repair the damage done to Ashfield Flats and ensure that it continues to be a social and environmental asset for the whole community. What I do not want to hear from the minister this morning are platitudes that the government is concerned about Ashfield Flats, but that there is no commitment to a long-term management plan. What I want to hear from the minister today is that he is prepared to draw up that management plan in conjunction with the community. I want to hear that he is prepared to put money into making sure that it happens. I want to hear from the minister that he will, as a matter of urgency, deal with the erosion that people are so concerned about.

Minister, the Barnett government cannot say that it cares about the Swan River if the minister does not fix the problems at Ashfield Flats. The community feels very deeply that this area has been neglected. I make it clear that I make no criticism of the staff at agencies such as the Town of Bassendean or the Swan River Trust; they have worked very hard to do what they can to improve Ashfield Flats, but time and again it comes back to the government, through the WA Planning Commission, as the owner of much of the land. Without the government committing resources, without the government committing to a management plan and without the government being prepared to stump up some cash, nothing much will change. I look forward to hearing something positive from the minister this morning. I know he had some forewarning that this issue was going to be raised, so I expect more than just a few platitudes; I look forward to a concrete action plan with some real dollars and cents.

[Interruption from the gallery.]

The SPEAKER: Excuse me, members of the public, you are quite entitled to listen to the debate, but you are not to clap or make any noise in the gallery.

MR J.H.D. DAY (Kalamunda — Minister for Planning) [9.19 am]: Ashfield Flats is an area of land zoned for parks and recreation and, as the member indicated, it is vested in the Western Australian Planning Commission. The Western Australian Planning Commission, of course, owns the land on behalf of the wider community and it

is essentially for conservation purposes. It is not the case that the government owns this land for its own gratification or profit in any way; it is for conservation purposes. The Department of Planning and the Swan River Trust are aware of the community's concerns about this area and they are working to address those concerns. On behalf of the Western Australian Planning Commission, the Department of Planning currently undertakes various land management activities on the Planning Commission-owned land at Ashfield Flats, including the provision of fencing, firebreaks, weed management, mosquito control—undertaken by the Town of Bassendean on behalf of the Department of Planning—and the slashing of long grass. In addition, the department is working to address local residents' concerns about the condition of the riverbank. Initially, the department engaged contractors to fence off the areas of danger along the foreshore, and it will focus work on this area in the near future to stabilise erosion in the short term. Coincidentally, this morning there is a meeting with some community members and representatives of the Department of Planning and my office at the site to update them about the current activity and what is intended.

I am advised that the department is also working with the Swan River Trust on the development of a foreshore management plan for the area. Specifically, the Swan River Trust has engaged Syrnix Environmental to provide advice on interim measures that can be put in place. This management plan will confirm the responsibilities of the relevant landowners regarding the management of the foreshore and facilitate funding from the Western Australian Planning Commission and following applications to the government's riverbank program. So far the riverbank program has co-funded numerous projects in the Town of Bassendean, including two locations next to Ashfield Flats involving the revegetation and stabilisation of eroded foreshores. Those projects include work at Ashfield Parade, for which \$645 000 in grant funding over four years was provided and works completed in November 2011, and at Sandy Beach Reserve, immediately upstream of Ashfield Flats, for which \$51 000 in grant funding was provided for works that were completed in December 2012. As part of the government's 2014 state budget, the Liberal–National government committed \$3 million in new funding over three years to ensure that the river park remains healthy and accessible for future generations. This funding is on top of the \$1 million annual contribution to the Swan River Trust's riverbank program. Since 2008, the government has invested more than \$9.2 million in approximately 100 projects focused on riverbank restoration around the Swan River—obviously, that is wider than this specific area. The Western Australian Planning Commission continues to work closely with the Swan River Trust and the Town of Bassendean to allocate a portion of this funding to stabilise and revegetate the foreshore areas around Ashfield Flats.

To reiterate, the department, as I mentioned, is working with the Swan River Trust on developing a foreshore management plan. That was requested, and is being undertaken. I express appreciation to the volunteers referred to and the community groups that have committed to working in this area. A very large amount of land is owned by the Western Australian Planning Commission and the state generally. As I said, it is held in trust for the community and we rely on volunteer groups in a range of locations to provide assistance. I think that is entirely appropriate. It is good that people are interested in being involved and the government is keen to work with them in a sustainable way to ensure that areas such as Ashfield Flats are appropriately protected and conserved for the future.