

GIBB RIVER STATION LANDING STRIP

Grievance

MS J. FARRER (Kimberley) [9.32 am]: I grieve to the Minister for Transport and to the Minister for Local Government on behalf of the Gibb River community, also known as the Ngallagunda community, and the many people who travel the Gibb River Road in the Kimberley, about funding for the Gibb River airstrip. I am aware that the community last received funding to carry out work on the airstrip in 2009 through the Department of Transport scheme referred to as the Regional Airports Development Scheme, also known as RADS. This funding did not include the installation of automatic lighting for the runway. Although applications for the next funding round are not accepted until August 2014, it is my understanding that the Department of Transport is able to consider out-of-session RADS funding requests if the matter is urgent.

The matter I raise today is urgent; it is a matter of life and death in many cases. Concerned community members have requested assistance to secure funding to have automatic lights installed on their community airstrip. The airstrip is essential for emergency airlifting and for the Royal Flying Doctor Service doctors attending to collect patients, particularly at night. The community asks the minister to please bear in mind that there is generally only one nurse in this community at any one time. On top of their usual nursing duties, they must also take on many other roles, including ambulance driver and on-ground flight controller. As the airstrip currently does not have automatic lights, the nurse has to leave the patient unassisted in the back of the vehicle, get out of the vehicle, take out the strings of lights and walk up and down the runway laying the lights out by hand before switching them on and going back to the patient and waiting for the Royal Flying Doctor Service plane to land. Hopefully the patient has not had a bad turn while the nurse was doing all this. It goes without saying that this process is very frustrating for the nurse and the patient.

This is a remote area; however, thousands of people travel the Gibb River Road each year. The tourist season has just commenced in the Kimberley and this is the time of year when we see a rise in accidents on the many unsealed roads throughout my electorate. There are big rivers on the Gibb River Road that sometimes delay people from getting to where they want to go. If they require emergency assistance, sometimes people cannot cross the rivers because of high water levels or damage to the road from the wet.

A community member reported to me that they had approached two Liberal Party members over a month ago seeking grant funds to have the lights installed and were told that \$25 000 may be available through a RADS grant, however the community must fund a further \$25 000. RADS grants usually fund 50 per cent of a Western Australian regional air project to improve services and safety; however, using his discretion, the Minister for Transport is able to approve a higher percentage of funding—that is what they were told—if the leaseholders cannot contribute their 50 per cent of the funding required. The community simply does not have this money and it simply cannot continue to transport patients and respond to emergencies without the appropriate resources.

I ask both the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Local Government to immediately start working together to secure funding for the estimated \$50 000 project to upgrade the Gibb River community airstrip. Thank you.

MR D.C. NALDER (Alfred Cove — Minister for Transport) [9.36 am]: I thank the member for the grievance. I understand that the Gibb River station is located halfway along the Gibb River Road. The Gibb River Road was primarily developed for the cattle industry, but also services remote Aboriginal communities and, more recently, tourists accessing the spectacular river gorges and other attractions out there. The government recognises the importance of the tourist traffic along the Gibb River Road and the importance of remote communities having adequate aerodrome infrastructure to facilitate the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

The government provides financial assistance to regional aerodromes through the Regional Airports Development Scheme to improve regional air services and safety to Western Australia airport owners and leaseholders. The RAD scheme is administered by the Department of Transport. Since 2008, it has distributed just over \$33.7 million and benefited 193 regional and remote aerodromes across Western Australia. Although it is largely a responsibility of individual aerodrome owners and leaseholders to manage their facilities, the RAD scheme may assist remote community airstrips with their infrastructure projects, such as the purchase and installation of automated aerodrome runway lighting. The government prioritises and allocates funds for the RAD scheme according to need, based on submissions for improvements to facilities received from aerodrome owners. At this stage we have not received such a request, other than a letter in the last month advising us of this concern.

The Department of Transport liaises with other agencies to ensure that any contribution through the RAD scheme represents best value for money. The department takes a strategic asset approach in assessing the relevant merits of all the grant applications that it receives. As I said, the government has not received anything

formal, but a concern was raised about this issue following a car crash on the Gibb River Road, and given the increased tourism traffic on this road, we believe it is worth investigating.

Considering the potential benefit of improved airstrip lighting to the wider community, I have asked the Department of Transport to work with the owner of the Gibb River station aerodrome to investigate suitable options for upgrading the airstrip lighting and prepare an application for the 2014–15 RAD scheme grants. Given the member's comments today—it is the first I have heard of some of those comments—I would like to spend more time with the member to get a better understanding and a fuller response back to her on this issue.