

SUPERMARKET DEVELOPMENT — BRUCE ROCK

Grievance

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Opposition) [9.16 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Regional Development. I thank the parliamentary secretary to the Premier for hearing this today. The issue I seek the minister's support on today is in regard to the development of a new supermarket in Bruce Rock. Unfortunately, the town lost its supermarket on 25 March 2020 in an arson blaze and due to the unusual circumstances of the fire, the owners of the property had no access to insurance and no ability to rebuild. The fire razed the town's only grocery store to the ground and left residents facing a 100-kilometre round trip to Merredin for supplies. This occurred at the beginning of the pandemic at a very difficult time and it placed stress on the local community when stocks were already low because of the pandemic.

The Shire of Bruce Rock and the community have to be commended on how they rallied together to support one another. With isolation restrictions in place at the time, the council needed to act quickly to find a solution for locals, with a temporary supermarket being set up in the town hall and run by shire staff, volunteers and employees of the original store. Having taken on a temporary solution, they then made the decision to rebuild a new supermarket to ensure that there would be a store in town for the future.

In December 2020, a survey was conducted by an independent consultant to gauge the community's views on the shire's intent to construct the supermarket. They received 211 submissions, 98 per cent of which were supportive of the decision. An industry expert was engaged to assist and guide the shire in identifying a sustainable retail model, and on the basis of his advice the council determined that the best way forward was to build the supermarket and then attract a retailer to lease the building. The old Masons Shopping Centre site in town has already been purchased by the shire. These are the lengths to which some of our regional councils must go to ensure that their communities have access to what we consider to be essential services.

Shire President Stephen Strange emphasised to me that he believes this is an intergenerational solution that will serve the community for many years, and that it has been researched and progressed with the support of the community. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and losing its only supermarket, the Shire of Bruce Rock has also recently been impacted by bushfires. It is fair to say that the people of Bruce Rock have experienced more than their fair share of adversity over the past two years.

I will outline the time line of the actions taken to date to assure the minister that I am not raising the matter out of the blue. On 15 April 2021, the shire wrote to the Premier and the Minister for Regional Development about this project. On 22 April 2021, there was a response from the Premier advising them to contact the Minister for Regional Development. On 2 July 2021, there was a response from the Minister for Regional Development advising the shire to apply for a regional economic development scheme grant. On 20 October 2021, the shire submitted that application, requesting a \$250 000 grant. On 4 February, the shire was awarded \$105 000 of the \$250 000 it had sought.

The shire has left no stone unturned in its efforts to secure funding for this project. It has accumulated \$318 000 from community donations. There is a \$1.4 million grant from the federal Liberal–National government and it is submitting an application to the commonwealth building better regions fund for \$750 000 as well. It is prepared to seek a Treasury loan for any shortfall, but obviously would prefer to minimise this due to the impact on ratepayers' funds and the recovery that the shire is going through from the bushfires. There is still a significant shortfall. It is not an insignificant amount for the Shire of Bruce Rock, but it cannot continue to run the supermarket from the town hall forever. It would be naive to think that the private sector would simply step into a town the size of this community. I must emphasise that the shire is very appreciative of the \$105 000 it has secured, but it was disappointed that it did not receive the full amount it applied for. I understand that it fully met the objectives and scope of the grant program. Locals and the business community are actively fundraising. They have a history of doing this at every opportunity to contribute funds towards the project, but, as I said previously, they are also in the middle of recovering from those recent ferocious and devastating fires.

The Minister for Regional Development, the Minister for Local Government and even the Premier have all commended the Shire of Bruce Rock for its approach to local government, its projects and community engagement and spirit; in fact, the shire is regularly used by this government as an example of a council that is self-sufficient and proactive. On this unusual occasion, the shire just requires a helping hand. The proposed new grocery store is an essential service. The community has an elderly population who cannot readily travel the 100-kilometre round trip to purchase day-to-day groceries. Unfortunately, it is also impacting other businesses in the community, as one would expect, as people leave town to do their main shopping load; the butcher and the chemist, in particular, are suffering. That is because the store is temporary; it is in the town hall and it is not offering the full range of goods. We therefore ask for assistance to meet the shortfall. Having been in government, I know on occasion there are underspends or money returned to programs like the regional economic development grants scheme. Perhaps there are funds that are in surplus or held over in the program that could make up the difference; or, if this is not possible, perhaps a one-off commitment could be considered in the upcoming budget. I can assure the minister that the funds

will be put to good use and provide a real boost to the community following a very difficult time. The council has a good track record of working with the state government, fully funding and constructing housing for the state government for police, teachers and nurses. It has a track record of delivering on projects. If additional funds were forthcoming for this project, it would allow the shire to concentrate on recovering from the impacts of the fires and secure the community a new supermarket premises for future generations. The minister's consideration would be greatly appreciated. The shire stands ready and willing to meet with government to discuss this very important project, and I will be more than happy to facilitate this meeting at the minister's earliest convenience.

MS S.E. WINTON (Wanneroo — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.22 am]: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for her grievance and strong advocacy for the Shire of Bruce Rock and the people of Bruce Rock. Before I discuss the Bruce Rock supermarket specifically, I will give some background on the regional economic development grants scheme and its benefits in the regions.

Through the regional economic development grants scheme this government has played a key role in fostering an environment that allows small business and community-led initiatives to prosper and grow. The government is investing \$40.8 million over seven years to support projects stimulating regional business growth and innovation across regional WA. Strategic government investment can ensure that these projects get off the ground, helping to diversify local economies, create local jobs and support the long-term growth of our regional communities. Small to medium businesses are crucial to not only the economic stability of our regions, but also the sustainability of our communities. They provide employment opportunities across a diverse range of sectors. They help to drive innovation and, very importantly, as the Leader of the Opposition has outlined, make our communities better places to live.

Regional development commission boards establish regional priorities for the grants to ensure that they align with regional priorities. Over the first four rounds of the regional economic development grants program, we have invested over \$3 million into 34 wheatbelt projects. For round 4, the Wheatbelt Development Commission board established the regional priorities as projects that diversify the economic base and enable entrepreneurship and innovation. In round 4, 26 applications were received, including the Shire of Bruce Rock's supermarket project requesting funding of \$3.93 million for a total project value of some \$26.251 million. The 26 applications were assessed by the Wheatbelt Development Commission board, with recommendations made to the Minister for Regional Development. The applications were diverse in their requests, highlighting the continued strong demand for the regional economic development grants program. Given how highly competitive this funding round was, no project received the full funding amount requested. We sought instead to maximise the opportunities for the recommended recipients while still ensuring that all projects were able to proceed. In fact, the shire's project was on the reserve list because federal funding had not been committed, but the minister asked for it to be brought forward and, as is permitted under the guidelines, 30 per cent of next year's funding was brought forward to fund this. The RED fund was fully allocated.

I am sure the Leader of the Opposition knows that five projects in the wheatbelt were successful in that round, sharing some \$795 000 to boost the region's local capacity and economy, including Augment Agriculture, which received a \$200 000 grant to develop a new head office and operation centre in York; Evoke Living Homes, which received a grant of \$200 000 to establish a purpose-built undercover structure to allow the manufacture of homes in all weather conditions; Whinbin Rock Farms, which received a grant of \$195 000 to construct a bespoke malting facility to house its equipment and infrastructure; and the Noongar Land Enterprise Group, which received a grant of \$100 000 to support the expansion and upgrades to its native tree nursery. As the Leader of the Opposition mentioned in her grievance, the Shire of Bruce Rock received a \$105 000 grant towards construction and fit-out works for the new Bruce Rock supermarket.

I acknowledge also the very passionate advocacy for this project by Hon Darren West of the other place, who made sure that the minister was fully across this project and supported very strongly the Bruce Rock supermarket being upgraded from the reserve list.

When the original supermarket was destroyed by fire in 2020, the Bruce Rock community rallied together to establish a temporary store in just six days. The McGowan government applauds the shire for displaying such high levels of commitment to the community not only through the temporary supermarket, but also in the purchase of the supermarket site to support its re-establishment. The shire has a fantastic record, as mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition, of over 20 years of investing in its town centre and retail precinct.

The construction of a fully operational permanent supermarket will provide not only essential food and groceries locally, but also further benefits to local businesses, creating much-needed additional jobs and adding an estimated \$2.85 million in revenue to that local economy. The Minister for Regional Development has been advised that an independent business assessment of the viability of re-establishing the supermarket is a sustainable and profitable enterprise. The Shire of Bruce Rock has had preliminary discussions with the Western Australian Treasury Corporation about securing a low-cost Treasury to support the funding shortfall. We are supporting that application. We

understand that a request for tender for the new shop construction will be released today and the shire will have a greater understanding of the full construction costings once this is complete. The retail consultant for the Shire of Bruce Rock has indicated that there is a lot of interest and the shire will go to market once it can confirm a completion date for the project. We also acknowledge that there are numerous infrastructure projects across Western Australia that are currently experiencing higher than normal material costs, in part due to global supply chain challenges, and the Bruce Rock supermarket construction will likely be no different. This shire has a history of success in attracting and retaining businesses, services and key workers to its community through the provision of physical infrastructure—new houses, industrial units and office space—and securing long-term leases. We are confident that the new supermarket will have far-reaching long-term economic and social benefits for Bruce Rock.

I conclude by thanking the Leader of the Opposition for bringing this grievance to the minister.