

AUGUSTA-MARGARET RIVER SHIRE COUNCIL

Statement

HON BARRY HOUSE (South West) [5.46 pm]: The Augusta-Margaret River Shire Council has hit the headlines again in recent days for all the wrong reasons. As I have my office in the town of Margaret River, I thought it appropriate to give a bit of an outline of the depressing history of the situation that has emerged in that town. I deliberately relocated my office from Bunbury to Margaret River seven years ago, in 1997, because it was a rapidly growing area that had never had a permanent parliamentary representative of any description. It was an area crying out for some degree of representation in this Parliament. I have worked very hard to provide communication between the local community, particularly the local government, and the State Parliament during that time. It is a bit sad that I have only a depressing history to report on. This will not be a very positive report. However, the situation must turn around and I am confident that it will do so in years to come.

For the past 15 years the Augusta-Margaret River shire has had a history of instability in local governance. There has been a history of local shire presidents - I will name four: Kath Thompson, Dave Patmore, John Yates and Rob Knapp - who have been defeated at elections, and councils have been continually turned upside down. There was a period of relative stability under the presidency of Lloyd Sheperdson in the early 1990s, when he was president for four years, but the unrest and turmoil raised its head again. Going back a little, members might recall issues involving leasing of cars by councillors and the employment of a controversial chief executive officer from the east. I know the Augusta-Margaret River shire is not the only local government that has done this. There have been constant issues over planning matters, particularly in relation to the Gnarabup area in Margaret River.

Hon Jim Scott interjected.

Hon BARRY HOUSE: I do not claim credit for much of this. I actually think I have made a genuine attempt to provide some advice, or at least provide a conduit for the local community to the Government and the Parliament to try to resolve some of these things. The area has attracted a large number of people who are vocal, articulate, talented in many cases and wealthy in some cases, but not all. Unfortunately, among the influx of people there are some elements who have adopted very narrow, selfish and intolerant attitudes, and this is reflected in the difficulties of local governance in that area.

This finally led to the dissolution of the council in 2000, which was caused by the number of resignations reducing council membership to less than a quorum. Those people were replaced by three commissioners, who served for about 18 months, when there was a return to an elected council. In that time, the commissioners resolved some of the issues. To my disappointment, they did not resolve some of the more outstanding and controversial ones, and some of them linger to this day and involve litigation and a large degree of bitterness in the community. They made one decision to restructure the council ward system, reducing it to seven wards. My belief, having seen a little bit of the track record since then, is that seven is too few. I believe that nine is reasonable. With seven wards, there is an easy opportunity for one group of people to gain sole control of the council. When the council was re-elected, the community was so fed up with the continual bickering and adversity that frankly there was not much interest in it for a couple of years. Two of the councillors were returned unopposed, and that is an issue that the community itself has to address. It is still an issue that good, capable people from the local community will not put up their hand for the job.

The community was very tolerant for a couple of years, and things seemed to be sailing along okay. However, tensions started to emerge in the form of continual litigation over a range of issues involving the continuation of the Gnarabup argument and a lot of other planning issues. A continual stream of councillors were resigning, with new elections still failing, in some cases, to attract competitive fields, and there was a high number of staff turnovers, including the chief executive officer leaving. The unrest and discontent emerged as a result of perceived or actual conflict of interest and interference in council affairs by some councillors. The accusations have been particularly levelled at one councillor, the deputy president, who is involved in the tourism industry. In a letter from Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich's forerunner, Hon Tom Stephens, he said that it was unwise for the council to adopt the written policy on short-stay operations.

I am standing here because local members like Paul Omodei and I have had a continual stream of complaints from people contacting our office, either in person, by telephone or by mail. It is swallowing up an enormous amount of our time. I do not exaggerate when I say that I sometimes get up to 20 complaints a week. Many of these concerns are related to planning situations in which there is a delay of some 16 to 20 weeks for simple planning applications ranging from a garden shed through to a \$20 million winery development. We have genuinely tried to help some of these people and the council officers to work out solutions.

One day I was asked by a constituent to attend a mediation session of the town planning tribunal. He was developing a marron aquaculture project and had had some quite onerous conditions applied to him by the

council. I was a little mystified when I was barred or excluded from that hearing - I never did follow that up properly. A person is entitled to have legal representation or technical advice in those mediation sessions; however, I could not even be there as an observer, which astonished me a little, but never mind.

I think the problem stems from the inexperience of a lot of councillors and their attitude that they are put in that position to dictate their agenda to the community. They do not feel that community representation is an important part of their role, and that is a serious shortcoming.

I am sure the minister is taking all this on board, and will try to address some of those situations to help that council and that community. This, of course, has culminated in a series of bizarre policies on rating and other issues. This has raised the community's ire, evidenced by a very well attended electors meeting on Sunday, which passed a vote of no confidence in the council and requested that it resign.

I am aware that the minister has been to Margaret River today. I presume she flew into Margaret River. One of the issues is that the council wants to virtually close the airport, so I hope it did not mind her flying in. I hope she got a good overview of the situation. I am not suggesting that she has the grounds to dismiss the council; I do not think that exists, but I am sure that it would welcome any advice and support that the minister is able to provide.