

PERTH PARKING LEVY — CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT CHURCHES

Grievance

MR P. ABETZ (Southern River) [9.46 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Transport and relates to the Perth parking levy that affects churches in the Perth central business district, which is subject to the Perth parking levy. I am a little reluctant to bring this issue to the house again, as I raised it in a grievance 18 months ago, on 13 August 2009. In essence, I do not have any problem with the government raising a tax from parking bays in the CBD to fund central area transit buses. When the tax was introduced in 1999, some of the affected churches took up the matter with the Department of Transport or the relevant department at the time, but, as one church treasurer told me, they got absolutely nowhere.

All parking bays in the CBD come under the ambit of the Perth Parking Management (Taxing) Act 1999, unless they are bays for the disabled or loading zones. Initially, the parking levy was a more moderate sum and most churches simply asked their parishioners to give a little more to pay the tax. Others rented out some bays to generate revenue to pay the tax, but that created parking problems when they held funerals or other events during the week. The Treasurer of the Baptist Church located on the corner of James and Stirling Streets in Perth tells me it has 20 parking bays in its car park. The congregation is some 90 members. Following the big increase in the parking levy to \$586 per bay, the church now faces an \$11 200 bill each year.

In 2009 I arranged meetings with the then Minister for Transport and his advisers and officials from the Department of Transport. The minister agreed that something needed to be done, but it was clear, initially, that some of the officials from the transport department were not so keen on exempting churches from the levy, flatly stating that it could not be done. My response was that if the act does not allow it, we are members of Parliament; we can change the act. At that time, we urged the minister and the staff to ensure that this issue was resolved before the next lot of tax became payable on 1 July 2010. After some months, I was informed that a proposal had been agreed to by the department and the minister that would exempt bays at churches that are used exclusively by volunteers who run programs during the week. Needless to say, I told the minister's office that that arrangement was totally ridiculous and unacceptable; it would be impossible to limit parking bays only to the use of volunteers who run events during the week. Who parks there on a Sunday? It cannot work. For example, if a pastor running a funeral during the week were to park in one of those bays, the church would have to pay tax on that again. Indeed one of the affected churches has done some homework on what other states do, and found that, in Sydney, the Parking Space Levy Act 2009 exempts all churches and charitable organisations. In Melbourne, the Congestion Levy Act 2005 exempts bays owned by the municipal council, religious bodies, charitable and public benevolent institutions, hospitals, universities, libraries and museums, provided they do not charge for parking in those spaces.

With a new financial year looming on the horizon, I approached the Minister for Transport about moving this issue forward. I believe that the parking bays around churches should be totally exempted from the levy, provided they are not leased out for commercial gain. The total loss of revenue for the Public Transport Authority running the CAT service would be minimal—if my calculations are correct, we are looking at around \$70 000 a year in forgone income, or 0.4 per cent of the total parking levy revenue. If the fees continue to be levied at the current level of \$586 a parking bay, it is inevitable that churches will find it more difficult to function within the city. Either they will have to lease out their parking bays commercially to recoup that money, which makes it difficult to operate things during the week, or the trend will continue and the churches will move out of the city into the suburbs. I believe that churches in the central business district fulfil a very useful function, not only for inner-city residents, but also for workers and people who have gone to those churches for many years. It is only right and proper that churches, as places of worship, be exempted from the Perth parking levy, and I plead with the minister to get this done and dusted before 30 June so that churches do not have to lay out the funds again. I would also ask that the minister give serious consideration to refunding the levy paid by churches for the current financial year.

MR T.R. BUSWELL (Vasse — Minister for Transport) [9.52 am]: I thank the member for Southern River for raising this issue. About four weeks ago, when we were last in Parliament, we met, in the great spirit of ecumenical equality, with the Council of Churches, upstairs. It was a —

Mr P. Abetz: It was the Association of Heads of Churches Western Australia.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: The Association of Heads of Churches Western Australia is who we met with. Obviously, the Council of Churches is a subset of that organisation in some way, shape or form. We discussed this issue. I said that I was sympathetic to the arguments put by the member for Southern River and the churches. The member is right; my advice is that 26 churches currently in the metropolitan area pay the Perth parking levy; if a church has fewer than five parking bays, it does not have to pay the levy. The previous negotiations with the former Minister for Transport led to the situation that the member outlined in which the exemption would be

extended to cover parking bays used by church volunteers. I agree with the member that that is a tad awkward to implement and it would seem odd that, for example, there would be a paid minister—who is underpaid, I am sure!—who by definition would not be able to park next to a volunteer who may be serving in the church at the same time for the same purpose.

It is not the noise, Mr Speaker; it is the back of the head that is putting me off a bit!

The SPEAKER: I will assist the minister and thank him for drawing the noise to my attention. I had noticed it before; however, I instruct members that sometimes it assists, during grievances particularly, if the member who has made the grievance is able to hear the minister's response. I hope that that has provided the opportunity needed, minister.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thought that the back was bad until he turned around; I thought he was the Minister for Health!

It is appropriate that I let members know that I have asked the Department of Transport to redraft the parking exemption with wording along the lines of "all parking bays that are exclusively available for church activities". This will not include bays leased out to commercial organisations during the week. Because, as the member knows, a number of churches, especially the older, more established ones that were present when the city was laid out, have large tracts of lands as a result of the generosity of the city founders. A lot of that land is the home of significant commercial developments. The churches do not want that land to be exempt and we will not be exempting it. Therefore, the exception will apply to all parking bays exclusively available for church activities, but will exclude bays leased out to commercial organisations. There was a bit of a hiccup —

Mr E.S. Ripper: What about church welfare organisations?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: That is a good question. As I said, there was bit of a hiccup this week while we worked through some of the technical fine points, including the issue that the Leader of the Opposition just raised. He is right that there are some quite significant operations in the city run by bodies associated with churches. My view is that we are talking about a church as a place of worship as opposed to those bodies, and those bodies should not be included. It is difficult working through some of those details because in some cases, those welfare activities are conducted out of the church premises, but in a lot of cases they are not. I aim to have the exemption structure in place by the start of the next financial year. I think that it will be well received by those 26 churches. I understand that, once the exemption is gazetted, those churches will be notified and provided with advice on how they should apply for the exemption for the next financial year.

Unfortunately at this stage—we had the conversation and good on the member for Southern River for trying—the government is not in a position to refund the moneys that have been paid this year. However, I think what we will be able to do next year is good news for the churches. Once we finalise the detail and the wording of that exemption, I anticipate that it will be gazetted and in place ahead of the 2011–12 financial year. Some churches then may be in a position in which they can start to reuse parking bays that they have had to lease out. Today and previously the member has mentioned the Baptist church on the corner of James and Stirling Streets. I understand that church currently leases out 21 parking bays, for which it receives around \$2 000 a month. Ultimately that is the church's decision, but those bays would not be exempt if they were continued to be leased out. Other churches have been forced into commercial arrangements to cover the parking fees. How they use their parking bays is entirely their business. I am hopeful that this exemption will address the concerns that the member has raised and I am the mindful of the need to have it in place by the next financial year. I thank the member for his ongoing representation on behalf of those churches across the city area.