

DENMARK CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVING — EVICTION

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.43 pm]: At question time today I asked the Minister for Education, through her representative in this house, about the eviction from its premises of the Centre for Sustainable Living in Denmark to provide temporary accommodation for classes during the refurbishment of Denmark High School. Members might recall that the minister's answer started with the words "The Minister for Education has not made a decision to evict the Denmark Education and Innovation Centre." I can tell the minister that very many hearts lifted when they heard those words, only to sink again moments later as she went on to explain why the Minister for Education is planning to terminate the centre's lease at the end of June. Mr President, I know that you and I, as members for the South West Region, take an interest in these cases. You and some other members of this chamber, such as Hon Robyn McSweeney, may well have visited the centre in the past. It is a truly remarkable place. I want to say to the Minister for Education tonight that eviction may not be what she is intending, but it will most certainly be how she is remembered if she does not step in and have a close look at what is being proposed for this centre. We simply cannot allow the bureaucrats with their desktop studies in Perth to make decisions such as this that will have such a serious effect on the Denmark community.

Let me provide a bit of background for members who are not familiar with the centre and its history. Some years ago, going back about 15 years in fact, the WA College of Agriculture–Denmark went through a major refurbishment. As part of the changes that were made to that campus, several buildings that were part of Denmark agricultural college were marked for demolition; that was around 1999. A really forceful community campaign took place during that time. Something like 14 different community groups were involved and some real warriors of political activism, such as the late Clive Malcolm, got their teeth into the issue and worked like stink over many, many years to make sure that those buildings were retained and given to the purpose that they have served now for the past 10 or so years. The dormitory block of the old agricultural college was one of those buildings that were saved by those community groups working together and putting forward an alternative plan.

So we saw this building—which is on the corner of that high school site on the drive into Denmark on South Coast Highway—renovated, extended and restored to the tune of something like \$1 million over the past 10 years. This building has gone from a very ordinary-looking, crummy, brick building into the most magnificent example of how we can build and operate sustainably in terms of accommodation that we provide for ourselves. All the work was done by local builders and craftspeople. Finally, in 2004, that building was leased from the Department of Education for 15 years. The plan was five plus five; that is, a five-year lease renewable in five-yearly blocks. The leaseholder is the Denmark Education and Innovation Centre—DEIC—and the manager is Green Skills. The Centre for Sustainable Living now forms part of an education precinct. In that precinct sits Denmark High School, the WA College of Agriculture–Denmark and TAFE—you, Mr President, would know it as GSIT, the Great Southern Institute of Technology. They are all on that same campus. The Centre for Sustainable Living has become an environmental educational centre providing training, education, conference facilities and quite substantial dormitory accommodation to support those conference facilities. It has in fact become a national leader in the field of environmental education centres. It has its own website and members can visit the website if they want to see more about how that building is designed with passive solar, active solar, on-site waste water management and organic food gardens; It is all there and is a most impressive set-up.

To give members a feeling for how vibrant the centre is, I will quickly refer to the sorts of things that happen at the Centre for Sustainable Living. There are environmental workshops and conferences; field study programs for schools and universities; natural resources management projects; Gondwana youth arts programs; counselling services and workshops; employment and volunteer programs; environment expos, art exhibitions and fundraisers; and sustainable living tours—the list goes on. There are about 5 000 educational visitors every year, 627 accommodation guests a year, 315 meeting room hires et cetera. This is a vibrant part of the Denmark community. On 27 October 2011 the bombshell dropped and the management of the centre was presented with a letter giving the centre notice to vacate by 30 June 2012. There were no warnings; there was no consultation with the Centre for Sustainable Living. I do not know why the answer Minister Hon Peter Collier read out referred to "lack of clarity" in my question about the lack of consultation, when I was in fact quoting the minister's own letter to the centre.

Why is the centre being evicted? First of all we were told it was because the school needed the buildings for a science block. I understand that is no longer the case. The buildings as I have seen them would not meet the prerequisites for a science building anyway. Then we were told it was for the safety of the children because of the proximity of conference guests to the school. That has now dropped away and we are being told it is needed for temporary accommodation while school renovations are going on.

I want to put to honourable members that we are at a moment in time when we have a choice. We can decide, as I think some of the bureaucrats sitting at their desks in Perth have done, that this is just a bunch of hippies running some kind of wild green scheme from the back of a school in a building that should have been demolished years ago. Frankly, that is the feeling I get from reading some of the background documents that have been provided to the centre. In that case I suppose we close our eyes, batten down the hatches and wait until 1 July and hope it will all go away. From 1 July, presumably the school will move in and take over that building—I do not know what for; maybe for classrooms or maybe just for administration use—on a temporary basis while renovations are being done at the school.

No offers of compensation or alternative venues have been provided to the centre at this stage. If that centre closes, there will be a large hole in the heart of that community and that will be what this government and this Minister for Education will be remembered for in that community. There is another way. As one of the centre workers said to me last week, “It doesn’t have to be this way.” The centre is offering to negotiate what it sees as, and what I think is, clearly a win-win solution to this problem. The centre is perfectly happy to negotiate on the provision of temporary accommodation for whatever the school needs during the renovations. The centre wants to work with the Department of Education to manage the proximity issue and to do what has been done in Mt Barker on their education campus—that is, to treat it as an opportunity rather than a threat. The centre wants to work out how to build a collaborative relationship with the school. It wants to work out a way of being proud of the way community groups and other education providers can live together to provide services for everyone’s mutual benefit. The centre wants to work on a joint learning precinct plan. We have thousands of signatures on a petition. I say again to the minister that it does not have to be this way.