

WHEATBELT SECONDARY FREIGHT ROUTES PROJECT

Grievance

MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt — Leader of the Nationals WA) [9.19 am]: I add my welcome to the girls who have come along to Parliament House today, and to Catherine, who is taking over the electorate of Central Wheatbelt. I look forward to catching up with her this afternoon.

My grievance is to the Minister for Transport, and I thank her for taking the time to consider the matters that I am raising today. I would like to discuss the wheatbelt secondary freight routes project, a proposed road network comprising 4 400 kilometres of local government–managed roads that connect with state and national highways to provide access for heavy vehicles into the region.

The wheatbelt region produces 41 per cent of the state’s total gross value of agriculture production, which was worth \$3.35 billion in 2016–17 alone. There has been a significant change in the freight task in the wheatbelt over the past decade. Deregulation of the wheat market, changes to Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd’s grain receival network, changes to soil management and increased lime application, and larger and more frequent machinery and truck movements have all contributed to putting pressure on a network of roads that are now managing a transport task they were never really designed for. We rely on an efficient transport network to support this important sector that benefits local, state and national economies, as well as providing safe thoroughfare for a wide range of other road users.

The aim of the project is to identify and prioritise continuous routes on local government–managed roads to optimise the network. The roads identified as part of the secondary freight network are essentially our weakest link in the network; they are no longer fit for purpose and restrict the size and type of vehicle that can be used to carry out the required transport task. Further, the burden of managing these roads falls to local governments, and not necessarily in a fair or equitable way. For example, lime is carted through some coastal shires, but they may not be the direct beneficiaries of the increased agricultural production as a result of lime application.

To the great credit of the 42 local governments involved, they have identified the issue and a project group was formed in 2016 to work on solutions. It is no small feat, as I am sure the minister would appreciate, to have 42 local governments working together on one project. They have collaborated to identify priority routes and to collect data. They have contributed funding to a pre-feasibility study and a cost–benefit analysis to support the planning process thus far. It is estimated that, to date, the in-kind investment by local government is more than \$750 000.

Having worked on this project for two years, the local governments are understandably keen to progress the project. Although the project group appreciates the fact that the state is undertaking the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy, significant work has already been undertaken on the wheatbelt secondary freight routes network plan. The project group acknowledges the informal advice provided by the Department of Transport, which has been working with it, that the project priorities and work done to date broadly align with work being done by the department and Main Roads Western Australia, albeit it is obviously a subset of the broader strategy the government is working on.

No doubt the minister is aware that the project group’s long-term goal is to secure funding support from the federal government of approximately \$500 million for staged capital works over a 10 to 20-year time frame. Of course, in order to be considered for funding by the federal government, the project needs to be listed as an Infrastructure Australia priority, which requires a stage 4 business case submission, which does not come cheaply. The group has for some time been investigating funding options to progress this business case, which it believes will cost up to \$5 million. An opportunity to secure funding from the Building Better Regions fund is currently available, with submissions required to be submitted by 15 November 2018. The minister would be aware that these applications require in-principle support of the state government, as well as funding from other sources, and these co-contributions need to be confirmed in writing at the time of the application.

Minister, I understand in November 2017 the group sought \$1.25 million from the state government Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development through, I think, royalties for regions, and was unsuccessful with that application. The group was advised at that point that any work done on this project would need to be done in the context of the RARF strategy, and that any funding from royalties for regions was not appropriate at that time. The group has been directed to deal with the team undertaking the RARF strategy; however, the majority of the consultation to date has been via Main Roads WA, the Wheatbelt Development Commission and the Western Australian Local Government Association. Although the group has received informal updates from the Wheatbelt Development Commission, it has had no formal correspondence or follow-up consultation from the RARF strategy team apart from one face-to-face meeting.

The project team is seeking to ensure that its work is supported by the state government. It also supports other project work being undertaken in WA analysing strategic freight issues. An indication from the minister of when

the RARF strategy will be completed would assist the project group better plan its activities. It has been suggested that perhaps a formal project group within Main Roads and the Department of Transport could work with the wheatbelt strategy network to ensure ongoing co-ordination of this work and also to assist in keeping lines of communication open. The minister's advice on this would be very much appreciated.

Clearly, the group does not want to miss an opportunity to secure federal funding to support the development of a full business case and to have the project listed as an Infrastructure Australia priority. Without that funding, the project group and local government road groups involved will be unable to do more than just play at the edges of implementing much-needed change. There is an opportunity now, and a letter of in-principle support, along with a financial contribution to accompany the project's Building Better Region fund submission, would be very much appreciated and welcomed by those local governments that have been involved in putting together such a significant project over the last two years

I raise this grievance in good faith. The group recognises that it has had input and assistance from Main Roads and the Department of Transport, and certainly it is not trying to create trouble; it is just aware that there are opportunities to secure funding from the federal government that it obviously cannot succeed in securing without WA government support. Given the information I have been provided with and the work I have seen done over the past two years, I know the group is very much trying to align what it is doing with the state government, and it appreciates that the project could be an important cog in a broader strategy. I look forward to the minister's advice on this important matter.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.25 am]: I know the member for Victoria Park is very excited by his booking, but maybe he could keep it down! I also acknowledge Lara, who has taken over the electorate of West Swan in the program today.

I thank the member for the grievance. I sought further advice from my agencies and today I spoke to some relevant people to get up-to-date information on what is happening in relation to the strategy. As the member outlined, the wheatbelt secondary freight routes strategy is being undertaken by a number of councils—I think it is 42—across the wheatbelt looking at the priorities for upgrading freight routes and working together. As the member said, that is always a challenge, but always very productive when it does happen, because all these issues can be addressed up-front and many of the issues raised in one council area will affect the next one. Of course, throughout the wheatbelt and regional WA—and the metropolitan area, frankly—it is very, very important for councils to work together to address transport challenges.

I understand the project group has been working away with assistance from Regional Development Australia and helped by Main Roads through its work in the regions. I understand that the group went to Infrastructure Australia and was told that without in-principle state government support, it would not look at or prioritise the project. The federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development is interested in the project, and I urge the group to continue to communicate through every possible channel to make sure that he is aware of the challenge in managing our freight movements across regional WA.

That is work that has been done. Then, of course, we have also launched the broader Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy. As the member said, freight route work is really a subset of the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy that looks at inter-modal transport across roads, rail and ports. The strategy is broader in scope and picks up parts of the midwest, Gascoyne and south west. I have been advised that the work that has been undertaken on the secondary freight routes has directly fed into the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy, and Main Roads has made sure that it has brought the information done by the 42 regional councils into the major freight strategy. It was outlined to me that a big part of the freight strategy will be roads. That work is underway.

In relation to the timing, again, I have been advised that the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy will be released by the end of the year. However, I want to meet with the Minister for Regional Development in the next two or three weeks to go through all potential requests and how the Department of Transport and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development will work together to deliver and respond to these requests.

The issue here is that, as we all know, a federal election is coming soon and I think people are seeing time lines in particular and a window within which to try to request funding from the federal government. In response to making representations to the federal government, I will liaise with the Minister for Regional Development. I urge the councils and the group to go directly to the federal government. I know that they have done that through Infrastructure Australia, but it is probably also worthwhile continuing to go directly to the federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development in the meantime to see what can be secured from the federal government.

Ms M.J. Davies: We are meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister on the weekend.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That is what I thought. Is he coming over here?

Ms M.J. Davies: Yes.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: That is great. I have said that the window is open now. In the meantime, I will work with the Minister for Regional Development. I will get a draft of the report and do what I can to support more road funding for WA. I have made that pretty clear. Despite comments that are sometimes made by my colleagues, I really like securing road funding. I will do what I can to support requests for road funding from the commonwealth and make sure that it is part of our overall strategy. But the feedback so far is that, basically, the road strategy is part of the supply program. It will work really well with the overall strategy and it will not clash in any way, so that is the good part of what is being done. A lot of the work that has been done by those 42 councils has fed directly into the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy. There has been significant consultation on that strategy across industry. The feedback so far on the Revitalising Agricultural Region Freight strategy has been positive in relation to whom they consulted with and the scope of the work. Again, the advice I have is that the wheatbelt secondary freight route network feeds directly into that and is not inconsistent with the overall strategy.

I will get the report and feedback on the overall strategy soon, I hope. I will talk to the minister. In the meantime, the member should continue to lobby the federal minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, directly and I will see what I can do about supporting further requests for road funding.