

Chairman; Ms Simone McGurk; Mr Albert Jacob; Mr Frank Alban; Ms Eleni Evangel; Mr Chris Tallentire; Mr David Templeman; Ms Margaret Quirk

Division 60: Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority, \$14 346 000 —

Mr I.M. Britza, Chairman.

Mr A.P. Jacob, Minister for Environment.

Mr M. Webb, Chief Executive Officer.

Mr I. Biddle, Business and Finance Manager.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: Questions, please. The member for Fremantle.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I have a question about Kings Park. On page 680, under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, I refer to the first dot point about the high level of visitation to the park. What is the minister’s view on the Aboriginal arts centre that is contained within the park? We have had some feedback that it is of relatively poor quality in terms of displaying the art and information about the artist, and is perhaps not the best example to showcase Indigenous art in our state. Has the minister had any feedback on that arts centre?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I have not had any such feedback at all around that arts centre. I do not know whether the CEO has. It is really venturing an opinion. I certainly do not think it is the intent of the centre either.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I do not imagine that is its intent.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I have not had any such feedback, but I am always open to feedback.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I guess the minister has now. Does the minister know when the lease arrangement is up?

Mr M. Webb: Referring to the member’s earlier question, I have not had any such complaints either. I understand the lease comes up for review in 2015. We are currently going through a review process as to how we will manage the lease going forward.

Ms S.F. McGURK: Is the review of the current lease arrangement open for public comment? Is there an opportunity for people to give feedback directly to the minister or the department?

Mr A.P. JACOB: Is that feedback on the lease conditions?

Ms S.F. McGURK: No, about the current leaseholder.

Mr A.P. JACOB: And whether they think it has been a productive leasehold or not.

Mr M. Webb: The simple answer is yes; people can write to me. We have just completed a two-month public review of our next five-year management plan. I have not reviewed the submissions yet, and it may well be that people have made comment through that process.

Mr F.A. ALBAN: I refer to the second dot point on page 680 under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”. I note that fire risk management is a key consideration of the authority. Can the minister indicate how the authority manages this risk, particularly in our parks?

Mr A.P. JACOB: In 2013–14 to date there have not been any bushfire incidents recorded in Kings Park; however, one small fire was reported in Bold Park. The number and extent of the bushfires in both parks has been declining due to established procedures and practices in place, together with excellent support from the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. Any bushfire is usually quickly extinguished. Specific practices leading to more effective management of bushfires include targeted fuel reduction, fuel management activities around key assets, the control of highly flammable weed species across bushland areas, an asset inspection and improvement program with a focus on fire risk, and also building maintenance, especially cleaning leaves from gutters. In addition, Kings Park and Bold Park have over 40 bushfire-trained staff. Their firefighting equipment includes two light tankers and two medium tanker appliances, and one rapid response unit. There are over 100 fire hydrants throughout Kings Park. Rostered staff are on call 24/7 throughout the fire season. We have a very good process for closing all or part of the parks, depending on the daily fire danger rating, which is provided by the Bureau of Meteorology.

If I can segue a little off that question: very significantly, in 2013 the Authority appointed a fire ecologist in order to better understand the relationship between fire events and the protection of biodiversity in Swan coastal plain ecosystems. The development of a research agenda has commenced through consultation and collaboration with the Department of Parks and Wildlife and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services. That obviously has wide-ranging implications beyond Kings Park and Bold Park, particularly for those two agencies and particularly for Parks and Wildlife, which is one of my agencies. That aims to inform future fire management of urban bushlands as we seek to protect life and property as well as biodiversity, and find a balance in that.

[4.40 pm]

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Ms E. EVANGEL: I refer to the first dot point under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 680. I note that Kings Park, which of course is in my electorate of Perth, is the state’s single most-visited tourism destination, with 5.8 million visits in 2012–13. Can the minister advise what achievements the Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority has gained in the past year in recognition of what Kings Park must be doing really well to deserve such a high level of visitation?

Mr A.P. JACOB: It is a very good question. Kings Park botanic gardens is indeed the most popular single-point destination in Western Australia. Eighty per cent of its visitors are domestic, 10 per cent are from interstate and 10 per cent are international visitors. We have had a particularly good year at Kings Park. I was going to fill in on what we have achieved, but since the CEO is here, he may as well inform the committee on some tourism awards in recognition of excellence, both for the park itself and the Kings Park Festival over the past 12 months.

Mr M. Webb: In this current financial year, Kings Park botanic gardens was successful in winning the gold medal for best festival in Western Australia. It also won the Sir David Brand Medal for best tourism destination.

Early this year we also were successful in winning a gold medal at the Australian Tourism Awards for the best festival. We also won an award for best attraction.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I have a question about “Biodiversity Conservation and Scientific Research”, which appears on page 682. Can the minister tell us roughly how much is spent per hectare on weed management? It would be a useful figure to understand because it has implications for bushland management right across the urban area.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Certainly. I will get the CEO to provide a bit more detail on bushland management. I do not know if I could call it an answer that I gave earlier. BGPA is leading some very good work on bushfire impacts on coastal plains. That is being done in the Department of Parks and Wildlife. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services is also feeding into that. That will have significant benefits in understanding the best way to apply a fire regime on the Swan coastal plain, to protect people and property and to promote biodiversity—when to do it and how to do it, and a range of other impacts. Some good work is being done on the smoke impacts of seed germination. The department has also made recent breakthroughs on anigozanthos, which is in that space. But getting back specifically to weeds, Mr Webb may want to provide some detail.

Mr M. Webb: Weed management is critical, as the member outlined. It is a major driver of fire. We expend a level of funding each year to manage the weeds in both Kings Park and Bold Park. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the figures. I will be happy to provide those by way of supplementary information, if that is adequate.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: The department’s weed management would include costs for things such as staff and chemicals, but could the volunteer effort also be costed into that so that we really get the full picture; the real overall cost of weed management per hectare? That would be great.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I do not know how far the department aggregates the volunteer effort. There is a significant volunteer effort in Kings Park. We have a good total number of volunteer hours, but I do not know if that is broken down into activities such as weed management and guided tours. I know we can certainly provide the first breakdown and we can give a total on volunteers, but I do not know how much further it can be broken down. We have a total estimated cost of the volunteer benefits, but whether that breaks down to weed management as opposed to other volunteer efforts I am not quite sure.

Mr M. Webb: I can provide accurate figures on both staffing and the chemical costs. I can only provide a list of volunteer activity.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: That would be good.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I refer to the first two dot points on page 680. I refer to the Nature Play WA asset in Kings Park. Does the minister have a mechanism to record the use of Nature Play; that is, how many families visit that component of Kings Park botanic gardens? I am very supportive of it. I think it has been an excellent addition to Kings Park. I am interested in how many families of young kids experience that aspect of the park.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I guess the member means Rio Tinto Naturescape. We have numbers in and around formal school and group bookings. In terms of casual visitors, I do not know whether the department has a metric to capture that. I will throw to Mr Webb to provide more detail on that.

Mr M. Webb: The minister is correct: we have accurate figures in relation to school groups. It would be only an estimate for the public. There are two spaces within Naturescape. There is the school area, the education area, which is about one-third of the site; the other two-thirds of the site is a public asset. I can give an estimate for the two-thirds.

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Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Could I have that via supplementary information? If the minister could provide the school numbers, through the chief executive officer, particularly the educational aspect, that would be good. It has been open now for how long?

Mr A.P. JACOB: Two and a half years.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: If I could have an indication of the usage and attendance figures, that would be appropriate.

The CHAIRMAN: Is the minister happy to supply the supplementary information?

Mr A.P. JACOB: We will break the figures down as far as we can. My understanding is that the average length of stay for a family is about two hours. I know the last time I went through there, which was only a few weeks ago, I could not move because of the number of schoolkids. I felt a little out of place, actually. The member is right; it is a magnificent little site. I think we can give a fairly comprehensive breakdown of group bookings and times. We can break it down to that level.

The CHAIRMAN: Could the minister confirm once again, for recorders, what he will supply?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I will supply bookings for the current financial year up until this date of the Rio Tinto Naturescape area for school bookings and group bookings generally, looking for total numbers and also length of stay, as far as we have it.

[Supplementary Information No B66.]

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I refer to the first dot point under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”. Kings Park botanic gardens continues to be the single most-visited tourism destination, with 5.8 million visits in 2012–13. I assume that it continues to increase; or has it plateaued?

Just on that, one of the things I am interested in about the number of visits is the impact of visitation on the natural and built infrastructure. Is it reaching a stage where it is becoming so loved that it will actually deteriorate in terms of maintenance unless we look at an increase in capital investment to reinforce it for the state’s population increase as well as tourism? I am interested to see where we are at with the status of the park and its capacity to deal with current visitation and future visitation given the population growth in the metropolitan area and the state.

[4.50 pm]

Mr A.P. JACOB: In general, I would have to say that this government has spent a lot in Kings Park. The member mentioned the recent investment in the upgrading of Kings Park infrastructure. Rio Tinto Naturescape and Synergy Parkland are not that old. There was an upgrade to Fraser’s restaurant for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, and obviously roadwork changes have, I think, reduced the impact of those visitors and set the park up for future growth in the coming years. It is well funded. If the member looks at page 683, the asset replacement program has \$1 million a year going steadily into the out years to manage what we have. We have a lot of new infrastructure in the park, one of which, the Place of Reflection, I only had a chance to visit the other day. It is out near the John Septimus Roe memorial, which is another fantastic little one. Even though it is a busy park, there are lots of opportunities to find very quiet little nooks and crannies if people want a little isolation and quiet reflection. It caters to both of those very well, and significant investment has already gone into it to set up the infrastructure for the years to come.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Mr Webb may be able to answer this question: has there been any progress on the acknowledgement of Indigenous people? When I was minister, I remember that there was some ongoing work about an actual acknowledgement of the Noongar people. We have a number of areas and monuments, if you like, in the park that commemorate or acknowledge certain aspects of our cultural and event history. Is there any progress with some of the requests for acknowledgement in the park itself that have been put forward by the Noongar people? I know there are some trails and interpretive stuff but the director general may remember that at one point there was talk of a statue or that type of acknowledgement that was being worked on by the Noongar people. Is anything of that nature planned?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I ask the chief executive officer to answer specifically on the memorial issues that the member is speaking about, but my knowledge is that all, if not most, infrastructure activities in the park have been very sensitive to aspects of first owners and traditional owners of that land. A good example for me is the Lotterywest Federation Walkway, which has those very low, spread-out foundations so that it is touching the earth lightly. A part of our goal is also landscape design sensitivity around implications for the Wagyl. There is a whole range of design implications that go into just about everything we do there. I accept the specific question on a memorial and ask Mr Webb to answer.

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Mr M. Webb: For about 14 years we have had an Indigenous reference group that has provided comment on activities within the park. More recently, we have engaged in conversation with the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council. There are a number of activities within the park that represent or demonstrate our commitment to Indigenous culture and heritage. More recently we had a young Aboriginal cadet write a book about his connections with Kings Park through a story. That was released only eight months ago. The commemoration that the member is talking about has not progressed. That is really a discussion that still needs to be had within the Aboriginal community.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Given the great tourism attraction that Kings Park is in its current form, does the minister think that putting in a cable car would be a positive incentive to increase tourism or would it detract from the park's intrinsic value at the moment?

Mr A.P. JACOB: No.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: No? It has been put to me that there is a suggestion that the new West Perth fire station may be sited somewhere on the periphery of Kings Park. Has the minister been made aware of that proposition?

Mr A.P. JACOB: No.

The appropriation was recommended.