

Division 71: Swan River Trust, \$11 249 000 —

Ms L.L. Baker, Chairman.

Mr W.R. Marmion, Minister for Environment.

Mr R. Hughes, General Manager.

Mr M. Cugley, Manager, River System Management.

Ms K. Rogers, Manager, Business Services.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: Member for Gosnells.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: My first question is on page 847, subheading “Relationship to Government Goals” and the desired outcome regarding long-term community benefit. Is further work being done on the government’s failed attempt to quantify the economic and non-economic values of the Swan Canning Riverpark?

[7.50 pm]

Mr W.R. MARMION: Can the member give me the first two words of his question again?

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: The page number?

Mr W.R. MARMION: No; what was the adjective? I know what member is referring to; was it about the further work we are doing?

The CHAIRMAN: Could you repeat the question, member?

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: It was regarding the economic and non-economic values of the Swan Canning Riverpark. There was a failed attempt to come up with some quantitative data on the economic and non-economic values.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I think the member asked what further work we are going to do on that.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Yes; I am interested to know that as well.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I was actually after the “doing” part of the member’s question.

I will let the general manager elaborate in a minute, but, as the member is obviously aware, a report was prepared by Dr Michael Hughes from the sustainable tourism centre of Curtin University. The aim was to raise awareness of the value of the Swan Canning Riverpark, and it was a worthwhile project because it documented a number of economic, social, and environmental benefits. An exploratory study was undertaken by the Swan River Trust to examine the benefits, and a report was prepared. A decision was taken to not publish the report on the trust’s website as the study was very preliminary in nature, and the figures within the report could have been subject to misinterpretation if they had not been read in the context for which they were intended. They were estimates of key indicators, rather than comprehensive measures that could be added together to give the total economic value of the riverpark. No further work will be done with that now. That report was useful because it provided us with some information, but it was decided that if the report had been released, it could have been a bit confusing for people if they did not read it in context. It is very hard to measure the value of the riverpark. If we consider Matilda Bay in my electorate, for example, we can look at the economic benefits of that area by looking at the value of some of the restaurants, and that would be a way of analysing the value in some way. It could be said that because of the infrastructure there, it is worth a lot; but why should that be worth more than, say, another part of the river that may not have a restaurant on it? From an environmental and social point of view other people might say that another area is more valuable.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: But Matilda Bay does not exist if there are not those high upper reach parts as well.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Yes, but the member can see the difficulty in quantifying various aspects of the river. That was a very valuable report, and I think it has informed the Swan River Trust accordingly.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: On that subject, minister, because I have a lot of riverpark in my electorate, does the minister have a view on greater usage of the riverpark? The minister talked about the restaurants at Matilda Bay or Freshwater Bay, where residents do not want any further development. Does the Swan River Trust have a view on how we can better utilise some of these tracts of land that are under the control of the Swan River Trust; and does the minister think that we should have more cafes and restaurants and areas that could be used for tourism so that we could make better use of this great icon of Western Australia, the Swan–Canning River?

Mr W.R. MARMION: That is a very good question, member. I guess we have to look at it on a project-by-project basis and it is a bit of a balancing act. We have to consider where a facility should be sited for people’s

benefit. If people want to recreate or go to a cafe, we have to look at the environmental values, and proposals are normally assessed by the Swan River Trust against the environmental values of a particular site. A classic example at the moment is the proposal for an extension of a building in my electorate. I know the member for South Perth has some nice cafes in his electorate.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I remember that the minister visited one on one occasion.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I did not know the member was there, or maybe I would have gone somewhere else! I enjoyed that; it is a very nice restaurant.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I do not want to labour the subject, but the Swan River has so much potential. We do have problems with the condition of the river and people have concerns about the river, but I would like, through the minister, to ask the director general or the chief executive officer what the Swan River Trust believes is the potential for our river and for usage of land that abuts the river that is under the control of the Swan River Trust. Can we better utilise this great asset? I have always said that if it was in Europe or somewhere like that, it would probably be a lot better used than it is.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I guess it is a policy decision to some extent, so it is probably my role to make a general comment, but I will let Mr Hughes make a comment on the Swan River Trust's assessment of projects. I agree that we have a wonderful asset in the Swan River, and we have to make sure that we utilise it in the best way possible for all users—I like jogging around it!

Mr J.E. McGRATH: We used to swim in it!

Mr W.R. MARMION: Indeed; I believe that as a young boy I might have swum in it, but I think I was too young to remember.

But we are going to improve the foreshore in front of the Esplanade. We are going to open that up, and there will be an opportunity for greater use of and access to the river; there will be restaurants and urban development. One piece of good news is that there will be a new jetty for ferries to the Mends Street jetty in the member for South Perth's electorate, so the member will not have to walk all the way to Barrack Street jetty. The new jetty will be close to the Esplanade station; I think the member might find there will be better use of the river and the ferries and more people may be visiting South Perth and going to the zoo. That is one example of better utilising the river. I know there are environmental considerations in some other areas of the park, but if we look at the whole of the Swan River around the Perth metropolitan area, including South Perth, a lot of it is not natural environment, so there are opportunities, provided that any development does not worsen the pollution in the Swan River. It is a balancing act to ensure that the phosphorus and nitrogen levels, which are already probably double what they should be in the Swan River, do not get any worse. We have to look at the environmental and other constraints that need to be implemented to make sure that the river quality improves. Mr Hughes might be able to elaborate on that.

Mr R. Hughes: Certainly the Swan River Trust is on the record as supporting good development in appropriate places. As the minister said, there is actually an opportunity to bring people down to the river to use the river and enjoy it, and to also put, I suppose, modern environmental management practices into play. It is certainly clear that the community would like to see development at the right nodes, with other areas set aside for more passive recreation or nature conservation, which is supported by the trust.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: The minister mentioned the quantities of nitrogen and phosphorus in the river system. Why do the *Budget Statements* that deal with the key performance indicators talk about percentages but do not actually give us tonnage loadings that we are aiming for when it comes to nitrogen and phosphorus levels in the river?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I do not know specifically why, but I do know that the performance indicators are audited by the Office of the Auditor General because I used to work there—I actually had some involvement in doing the performance indicators for Main Roads Western Australia. That is a question that perhaps the Auditor's General staff may have taken up with the Swan River Trust, but perhaps Mr Hughes might be able to elaborate.

[8.00 pm]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: As I said, we have vague percentage figures in the table on page 848 that are not as helpful.

Mr R. Hughes: The tonnages or direct loads and concentrations were reported in our annual report as part of our key performance indicators. We are in discussion with the Auditor General about the best way to present those. We also report those contributions at the time that they are relevant through documents such as the "Swan

Canning Water Quality Improvement Plan”. All of the detailed results at subcatchment level are reported in each year’s annual report and they are aggregated to give us the results that appear in the budget papers.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I have a further question, which is my last on this subject. Can the minister tell me what the Swan River Trust is doing about the low oxygen levels in the Swan and Canning river system?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I thank the member for South Perth for that question. Oxygenation trials have been going on in various sectors of the Swan and Canning river system. Specifically, this year has been difficult because the long dry spell in 2010 meant that the Swan River required an extended oxygenation period, and insufficient rainfall meant that the Kent Street weir boards were not removed and the Canning River did not receive its annual flushing. In addition to this, fires in the Canning River Regional Park damaged both oxygenation plants, rendering them inoperable for a period, and storm surges resulting from tropical cyclone Dianne caused extreme tides that pushed unprecedented volumes of salt water over the Kent Street weir. Two oxygenation plants operating on the Canning River since 2000 have attempted to maintain oxygen levels and, as a result, they have improved the aquatic habitat and public amenity. These plants operate by adding pure oxygen gas to river water, discharging the oxygen-rich water at several locations to effectively oxygenate 2.3 kilometres of the Canning River upstream of the Kent Street weir.

As everyone knows, the Canning River probably needs more attention than the other parts of the Swan. There is, however, a further one kilometre of the Canning River upstream of this oxygenation area that we cannot manage with our existing oxygenation plants. This area, centred on the Nicholson Road bridge, typically experiences very low oxygen levels over the summer months, which threatens to undermine our efforts at oxygenation downstream. To ameliorate this problem, last year the coalition government announced an extra \$1 million to explore a range of new technologies capable of improving oxygen in this reach of the Canning River and to install the most appropriate system. Despite twice advertising tender requests to build, own and operate an oxygenation system on the upper Canning River in the past year—first advertised nationally and secondly internationally—no suitable tender offers have been received. The trust is reviewing its procurement model and aims to have a contract signed within the next six months. In relation to the Swan River —

[Mr A.P. O’Gorman took the chair.]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: We can read that information elsewhere.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I am happy for that to remain my answer, Mr Chairman.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I refer to the significant issues impacting the agency on page 847, which states —

The resulting poor water quality has brought negative ecological and social consequences.

Can the minister provide extra details on that comment?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Mr Hughes will be able to elaborate on that point.

Mr R. Hughes: This follows on from the comments that the minister made about oxygenation in the upper reaches of the Canning River. Specifically, what has happened is that we now have salt water in what is normally a freshwater area upstream of the Kent Street weir. The weir boards were put in place to stop the intrusion of salt water into the pool upstream so that there is a freshwater system for riparian and licensed extraction. What we are seeing at the moment, which is yet to be quantified because it has just happened this past summer for the first time that we are aware of, is salt water that will now affect streamside vegetation, and we have certainly seen deaths of freshwater mussels.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: I have a further question. Is that something that has come from the ocean?

Mr R. Hughes: Correct.

Mr J.E. McGRATH: How many kilometres up the river has that salt water gone?

Mr R. Hughes: It is seven kilometres past the weir boards, so it topped over by some 45 centimetres. Last winter was the first time in known history that the weir boards were not removed because of winter flow—because there was no winter flow last year to speak of. It is a very severe situation on the Canning River.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I refer to the first dot point on page 848, which is about more people wanting to use the river for various activities. This might be a function of the fact that I am a regional member, but visitors often ask me whether the Swan River is safe to swim in as they do not see people doing it. For instance, people do not go for a morning swim in the Swan River. Is the Swan River safe to swim in? What agents are particularly important in impacting on human health, including bacteria, that prevent it from being safe? Are we able to publicise on a public domain data that shows whether the Swan River is safe to swim in? What areas could be recommended and prescribed for swimming?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I will make some preliminary comments on this but the general manager can be more specific. The general comment is that the Swan River is safe to swim in, and obviously some parts are safer than others. I think we all remember that when we were young we swam in the river and used the Crawley Baths, which do not exist any more. I guess there were fewer jellyfish in our day, but there are certainly lots in my electorate. The note I have in front of me is that the Department of Health maintains general advice that swimming in waterways should be avoided after heavy rainfall—that is, greater than 10 millimetres—as rain collects pollutants from our streets, gardens and farms that are flushed into our ocean and rivers via the stormwater system. Swimmers and other recreational water users should exercise their own best judgement of water quality, observing its appearance and surrounds, and follow the other very helpful general tips about safe swimming in waterways that are also found on the Department of Health’s website. If the General Manager of the Swan River Trust has any safe tips for swimmers in the Swan River, he might like to elaborate.

Mr R. Hughes: The health department maintains monitoring of the popular swimming spots on the river, working with local government to keep an up-to-date report using a traffic light system on its website. People can actually google “Can I swim in the Swan River?” and it will lead them to the Swan River Trust website with links to that site. There are too many places to list now, but that site shows where people can go in the river and what the conditions are. That site also applies to other waterways around the state.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I again refer to the significant issues impacting the agency on page 847 and specifically to the comment that the trust will continue its work to secure the most cost-effective technology. What resources has the trust allocated to this task, and what specific projects is the trust currently working on?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I presume this relates to oxygenation.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: Yes, it could; I am not too sure.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Mr Cugley is probably the best person to answer this question.

Mr M. Cugley: That comment relates to our work in trying to find extra oxygenation relief that we can provide to the Canning River in addition to the existing two plants. The two plants on the Canning River were built more than 10 years ago. They have been effective and they were best-practice technology at the time. Using funds that were given to us this financial year, we have been unsuccessful twice in getting someone to build and operate oxygenation technology. However, we do not want to limit this to only the plants that were built 10 years ago because there might be new, more mobile systems and systems that are perhaps more passive and less demanding on electricity and oxygenation costs. I guess we want a broad range of outcomes and hopefully people will use a range of technologies to achieve them.

[8.10 pm]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I refer to the river protection strategy in the second last dot point at the bottom of page 847. What time line is the trust working in order to finalise the river protection strategy and where is the trust up to with this work?

Mr W.R. MARMION: A draft strategy has been prepared and it is with me to look at and see what we do next.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Is there no indication of when the strategy will be out?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Mid to late this year is the target.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: What is the problem; is it lack of resources, minister?

Mr W.R. MARMION: It is a case of working out a reasonable funding strategy. The river protection strategy refers to things and we have to work out how we might put that out in terms of funding.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Can the minister confirm for us that it is a priority? Members, including the member for South Perth, expressed how important the Swan River is. Surely getting this protection strategy right is critical to many Western Australians. Is there a degree of urgency about this?

Mr W.R. MARMION: The member is right. The protection of the Swan River is key certainly to those members who have part of the Swan River in their electorate, which includes me and the member for South Perth. And the member for Gosnells has some of the Canning River in Gosnells. It is a key priority and we want to make sure it is right before we get it out, so we are making sure every i is dotted and t crossed. It should be ready to release mid to late this year.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Will it include initiatives such as bringing controls on water-soluble fertilisers?

Mr W.R. MARMION: The draft document I have read is very comprehensive. We already have constraints on the percentage of phosphorous in fertilisers. I am sure that area will be covered as well. One of the key initiatives is to make sure we stop nitrogen and phosphorous going into the Swan River through a range of areas,

particularly some of the drains and catchments that run into the Swan River. Today we announced \$3.2 million towards the Ellen Brook and Bayswater drains and towards a nutrient-stripping wetlands to be constructed to try to strip out some of the contaminants.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I did see the media release. Essentially, is the minister saying that he will not have anything beyond a voluntary program to get people away from the water-soluble fertilisers?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I cannot be specific on that until I see the strategy. Certainly we will be looking at every measure possible to stop the river being further polluted.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Including bringing in controls on water-soluble fertilisers?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I am not sure what we are doing about water-soluble fertilisers. Mr Hughes might be able to provide some information on that.

Mr R. Hughes: The river protection strategy is very broad and comprehensive and does not relate only to the work of the Swan River Trust. The Swan and Canning River Management Act, which requires the strategy to be built, is essentially charging the trust with coordinating, if we like, the effort across multiple agencies with different responsibilities. We are certainly a player in the development of the strategies for fertiliser management, so it would be picked up in that. I think it is fair to say we have regulations in place in relation to urban use of fertiliser solubility. There is some regulatory action already there. Perhaps Mr Cugley can add to that.

Mr M. Cugley: One of the important things to help the health of our river was the announcement of the new regulations limiting the phosphorous content in retail fertilisers on home gardens. That was a very significant step that came into place on 1 January this year.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: I think this might be the last question. The second dot point on page 848 refers to the Perth Waterfront, which is a major development that will have a significant impact on the river. Has the trust received any additional resources in this budget to allow it to work on that development; what resources does the trust currently have allocated towards that development; and what resources does the trust believe should be allocated to the development during construction, given the size of this project and its impact on the river?

Mr W.R. MARMION: There are no additional resources. The Swan River Trust supports the redevelopment of the Perth waterfront. It will be an opportunity to reconnect the river to the city; it will bring about much-needed improvements to the quality of the water that passes through the site in the major drains. The trust, with the Environmental Protection Authority and the Department of Planning, will be working on the approvals required to make sure they provide adequate protection and community input to the project. It will have a role as one of the agencies involved in the planning. It is business as usual—part of the service—with delivery program 1. The total cost-of-service budget of \$1.439 million is where the funding will come from. There are 11 FTEs in that section, but they are not working specifically on that project.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: The minister has seen the plans. Clearly, the Swan River Trust has seen and approved the plans for that development, which is a very big development in the city of Perth. A very big hole will be dug in what is currently a filled-in river bank in the centre of Perth to allow a large part of the Swan River to come in and fill it up. I would have thought the Swan River Trust would have a very major issue with the Department of Planning overseeing the environmental impacts of that project, yet the Swan River Trust has been allocated no money to this major construction project.

Mr W.R. MARMION: The Perth Waterfront project has not been approved, by the way. The WAPC, along with the Swan River Trust, will be involved in aspects of planning the project. As the minister, if Mr Hughes advises me that there are problems with resourcing in that regard, he just has to knock on my door and we will see what we can do.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I refer to nutrient intervention systems on page 846. The minister touched on it a little when he spoke about nutrient stripping, but since the Ellen Brook branch is a major contributor to nutrient loads into the Swan River, what systems are planned to reduce the drainage loads into the Swan River and what effect does he believe they will have?

Mr W.R. MARMION: I thank the member for the question. As I mentioned, \$3.2 million has been allocated to build artificial wetlands in both Ellen Brook and Bayswater for the next four years, starting with the next budget. They will strip nutrients from catchment sites. In fact, Ellen Brook is probably one of the worst catchments polluting the Swan River, so it is a key catchment to work on to get the best value for our dollar. Excess nutrients, salinity, wind and water erosion, waterlogging and flooding are the major land management issues of concern in both the Ellen Brook and Bayswater catchments. Artificial wetlands also provide habitat for native fauna. This improves the amenity for the community with seating, shelters and other facilities incorporated into the landscape design around these wetlands, which encourage active and passive recreation. There are some

spin-offs for the community in these artificial wetlands. They also provide an educational resource for the community.

[8.20 pm]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: As a point of order, this is today's media release from the minister, so I think we can read it in the media.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I will just finish, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the minister have much more to go? I am conscious of the time.

Mr W.R. MARMION: No. I will just say that this government is committed to funding these sorts of projects. They are critical projects that will improve the quality of the Swan and Canning river system. Indeed, I fully support these artificial nutrient-stripping wetlands.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: What will the first \$500 000 that has been allocated this year do? Are we not looking at an intervention system that will achieve what we are trying to achieve? That amount of \$500 000 will just do the first bit of it. Will it have any effect? Will it take a while? How effective will this be in the immediate future?

Mr W.R. MARMION: There are three conceptual designs for Ellen Brook.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: That was my question.

Mr W.R. MARMION: The first bit of money will be for planning and agreeing on a design. Then there will be a staged construction. The money will be spread over four years. About \$2 million has been provided for Ellen Brook over four years. As the member has said, that is about \$500 000 each year for four years. The first tranche of the money will be for agreeing on a design and then planning that design. There will be a staged construction over the next three and a half years. As the water streams through the catchment, different basins can be built. The design has not been confirmed yet, but one design has four basins. One basin could be built in each year. The member is right; some results could be achieved each year and they could increase incrementally over the four years.

The appropriation was recommended.