

Metropolitan Cemeteries Board —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Ms R. Saffioti, Minister for Transport representing the Minister for Local Government.

Mr J. Fortuna, Acting Chief Executive Officer.

Mr A. Birch, Governance Officer.

Mr D. Thirumurthy, Acting Chief Finance Officer.

Mr B. Hennessey, Acting Chief of Staff, Minister for Local Government.

Ms J. Colli, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. Questions must relate to the operation and budget of the off-budget authority. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 3 June 2022. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

I give the call to the member for Roe.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to the asset investment program on page 582. Paragraph 1 obviously points out the \$40 million-odd lined up over the forward estimates. Could the minister please outline some of the key projects in the new works program?

[5.20 pm]

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: There are a number of different projects. Some of them are more significant, and one of the new investment decisions has been the Fremantle mausoleum stage 2. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board will commence planning and designing of the Fremantle mausoleum stage 2, comprising an additional 900 crypt and niche spaces, which will provide stock for approximately nine years based on the Fremantle catchment area. That was one of the big commitments. They are very expensive, as I know, in relation to the construction of the mausoleums, so that was probably the most significant investment decision in the forward works.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the minister update me on the progress of the Karrakatta Cemetery renewal?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: As we know, this is an ongoing program in which the board is undertaking renewal of certain parts of the Karrakatta cemetery. It allows Karrakatta to be continually used for years to come, and it is basically a long-term approach to ensure the viability and sustainability for cemeteries. This is an ongoing program, and processes have been put in place to ensure that it is done in a very sensitive way, making sure that families are very much both consulted on and informed of the processes. I know there were some issues, and I remember just being a bystander and watching some of the concerns that were raised earlier. The processes have changed so that there is a greater assurance of having families consulted as part of this process. I ask Mr Fortuna to speak.

Mr J. Fortuna: Thank you, minister. Currently, a few sections of Karrakatta are going through renewal. It takes some time to work through the process. The process may take 18 months or so to work through. We are currently working our way through several sections, about four currently, and we are starting a new section under Anglican ZK. We are working through that process at the moment, so that program will commence probably in 2023. We are working through an organised, agreed and approved program.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I appreciate those answers. As the minister acknowledged, there have been issues in the past. Could the minister enlighten me on what the biggest differences have been from then until now as far as the consultation process with family members, community engagement, or whatever we like go? What are the big changes that the board has made to help those families?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: Again, I will refer that to Mr Fortuna. I will say my family went through being part of that renewal program on two occasions, so I understand the issues that families raise, but I also know that the board is doing a lot of work to ensure that families are consulted appropriately. Does Mr Fortuna want to describe it? I think there is improved consultation with families and a greater time in which the process is undertaken, and also assurances about the retention of key assets such as headstones and so forth.

Mr J. Fortuna: The cemetery renewal program commences by having a subcommittee of the board, which is called the Monument and Assessment Advisory Committee, which looks specifically grave by grave at a particular section. That committee is made up of a couple of board members, genealogists, members from the Office of War Graves,

historians and representatives from the National Trust. It is a broad committee and it makes recommendations to the board on which plots should be retained and which plots can be renewed.

The big impact we have with cemetery renewal is in relation to headstones. Because renewal itself does not affect the remains, we do not ever tamper with the remains. We create new graves and new plots between existing graves. Therefore, the issue in contention is really about the headstones. Historically—I am talking about 20-odd years ago or more—our processes were not that great. The flaw was with our consultation, but at the same time it was difficult because we used paper-based systems and we need to find families. The areas that we are looking at are quite old. They are not just 25 years old. They are a bit older than that. The graves we are looking at are potentially 75 years—plus, so finding families is quite difficult.

The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has invested a little bit of money into our systems, and we now have a system that can capture contacts of the deceased. If someone wants to report to the MCB that they are a contact for a particular grave, we put that into the system. If a grave is in a renewal area, we will then use that database to advise the contacts who have put their name down that the area is being considered for renewal, and then they can make a decision based on that. Our consultation phase is over about an 18-month period. A period of 12 to 18 months is a legislative requirement. The MCB adds a further three months so that we can ensure that the community does have an opportunity to be aware of what is actually occurring within the cemetery. We put up signs in that period within the cemetery so that when we have visitors or people attend funerals, they will see those signs and they will see the areas being considered for renewal. They very easily mark out what the MCB is proposing, and people are more than welcome to attend our front offices and make inquiries about what is occurring. We advertise in the papers, on our websites, and all that sort of stuff. It is broad, but I think our issues with consultations have been addressed now, and we want to hear from the community in that regard.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thank you for that answer. I have just one final, slightly unrelated question, but, out of curiosity, every time we go to a larger funeral at Karrakatta, Pinnaroo and, to a lesser extent, Fremantle, there seems to be seating for about 100 people and about 400 people have to stand up. In the board's asset investment program, is it looking at a way of improving that scenario? It seems to me to be a challenge for any larger funeral in pretty well all of those locations where most of the people at the service are actually standing up.

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: This question is in relation to the chapels on the site. There is some funding for improvements, but I do not think they are for expansions. I will ask Mr Fortuna to comment.

[5.30 pm]

Mr J. Fortuna: In the existing forward estimates period, we are looking at refurbishment. If we have an opportunity to provide additional seating, that is what we will do. We need to be mindful of all the requirements for conducting a funeral service as well as some occupational safety issues. Going forward, in our longer term AIP, we have plans to extend the capacity of our chapels. It is one thing that we have been looking at because the smaller chapels are being used, but, as the member pointed out, they are overflowing. We are currently doing a refurbishment at Pinnaroo. That will cause some disruption to attendance, but we will still be mindful of providing a carefully planned funeral service and work with our stakeholders, which are our funeral directors, as well as the families.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thanks for that, it is a frustration of mine.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 582 of the budget papers. The total cost of the asset investment program is \$11 million this year and \$10.8 million next year. These funds are entirely sourced from the board's own revenues within the operations of the cemeteries. Is the board maintaining a steady liquidity situation and is its balance sheet maintaining a steady path with these expenditures, or does it have to incur some liabilities?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: If the member looks at page 582 and the asset investment program, he will see that it shows the total cost of assets investment and then it shows how it is funded, and it is funded by internal funds and balances. All the asset investments are funded from the internal balances of the cemetery board.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Yes, with respect, that is not what I asked. I know it is internal funds and balances, but is it running down the liquidity of the board or is it maintaining a steady balance sheet?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: There are no new borrowings, but I will ask Mr Fortuna to provide further advice on the net balance of the accounts.

Mr J. Fortuna: The MCB is a self-funded statutory authority, so all our revenues go back to pay for operational costs, which include the maintenance of our infrastructure. Also, any profits that we make are diverted to the funding of the asset investment plan, which also includes the long-term maintenance and long-term upgrade of our infrastructure. Our infrastructure includes the chapels, the mausoleums, the gardens, the grounds, the driveways, the pathways and all our amenities. Our business model is that any surpluses are reinvested wholly back into the operating and development of our cemeteries within the metropolitan area.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a question on sustainability going forward. Does the board envisage having to find extra sites? With the renewal program around the Karrakatta area for instance, will the board maintain sufficient ground for its operations for the foreseeable future?

Ms R. SAFFIOTI: I will provide comment on that. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has been working with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage for a number of years to identify sites for a potential new cemetery. That work is ongoing. In relation to the existing sites, we have the renewal program, but also the mausoleums provide a desired way for many people, in a sense, to be entombed and they are far more efficient with space requirements. For example, the Fremantle mausoleum will reduce the demand for new space and will meet demand for the next nine years for those who want to end up in the mausoleum.

There is a number of different initiatives but work is being undertaken to identify a new site. But in doing that, first of all, the space has to be sufficient and also the board has to check a number of other issues. Soil quality, watertables and so forth all have to be assessed before a new site can be determined.

The CHAIR: That completes the examination of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board.