

BAYSWATER PRIMARY SCHOOL — REMOVAL OF TREES

Statement

HON ALISON XAMON (East Metropolitan) [5.50 pm]: I rise to talk about an issue that has arisen in my electorate and, in fact, my local community. The matter came to my attention a few weeks ago when I received a phone call from the president of the Bayswater Primary School P&C advising me that she had only just been notified that in less than a week three gorgeous old trees located on the edge of the Bayswater Primary School oval were destined to receive the chop. The P&C was quite upset about this sudden decision and one of the first things it did was notify me, not only as the local Greens member, but as a parent at the school, to find out what could be done about this.

As it turns out, I am quite familiar with the three trees facing the chop because I am a parent at Bayswater Primary School. In fact, I have been a parent there non-stop for the past 10 years—since 2002. The school oval, which is also shared by the Catholic school directly opposite, St Columba's, is a public space well utilised by children and families in the area. It is the oval to which my husband and I take our boys to kick a footy and to practise in the cricket nets. I do not play cricket; the boys play it.

Like most people who choose to live in an older suburb, one of the many things that most residents in Bayswater enjoy is the plethora of really gorgeous established trees that live in our area. The trees around this oval, which are between 40 and 50 years old, are really large and quite gorgeous. When the local residents found out that with less than a week's notice these gorgeous trees were about to be lopped, they were understandably pretty upset.

It is not so much the trees that I wish to speak about, but the highly problematic process undertaken by the Department of Education, and I am calling on the department to lift its game. Apparently several months earlier—we know this now—there had been a complaint from one local householder upset because not only were the trees dropping leaves into his backyard, but also, it was alleged, the trees were somehow contributing to the flooding of his garage: water was allegedly pouring off the oval over the stone retaining wall. It has since been determined that there is no way that the trees are contributing to the flooding of anything, although I recognise that the council needs to do something about the sump drains immediately behind the concerned resident's property. That is an issue between the council and the resident; it is not the education department's problem and it is certainly not a problem to do with the trees.

I recognise that the trees will drop leaves. Trees will do that, especially in an established suburb like Bayswater. But the council has already indicated that to the extent that the trees overhang the concerned person's property—I have seen for myself that the overhang is not by much—it will be happy to undertake a pruning program.

It could have been thought that such a simple and common-sense solution would resolve the problem, but instead a solution has seemed to evade the monolithic bureaucracy that appears to be the Department of Education.

Instead, a decision was made to completely remove the three trees and I am concerned about the process by which this was done. Firstly, less than one week's notice to the school and to the P&C is absolutely unacceptable, particularly as discussions apparently had been underway for months. Secondly, there was no consultation at all with the school or with the P&C or the local community. Since then it has been an absolute struggle by the school and the parents to find out how this decision was made, whether it was a valid decision and whether it could in any way be overturned.

Once there was an inkling of why the trees apparently had to go, the parents were left to organise their own independent structural engineer's assessment, which of course found that the trees were not contributing to any flooding; and that issue has now been accepted by all parties, including, apparently, the original concerned resident.

The parents tried to arrange a meeting with the Department of Education. They wanted a public meeting, but eventually a meeting was agreed with a select handful of people. I will say that even that meeting kept getting postponed. Finally, the parents were presented with an arborist's report that said that the trees did not necessarily have to go, and then with a horticulturalist's report that effectively said that all trees are inherently dangerous—the implication being that all trees apparently need to go.

I will say on that point that I made it clear to the president of the P&C, when I agreed to assist it, that my boys sit under those trees during lunchtime, and if there was any suggestion that those trees were a potential danger to my children, I would go out there myself with a chainsaw and lop them down, because I am not prepared to have anyone's children put at risk, and certainly not my own. But, as it turns out, those trees are not a risk—nor are they a flooding hazard. They are just trees—they are really nice ones at that—and they provide very welcome shade for sports carnivals and also during lunchtimes.

However, the Department of Education has made it clear that its approach is that it is its land. The department does not have to explain why it makes decisions. It can do whatever it likes. It can disregard the wishes of the community, the P&C and the school. There has been no attempt that we can see in any way by the Department of Education to ascertain whether the trees really need to go.

The upshot of where we are at now, because this matter is still far from being resolved, is that it has been acknowledged, even by the Department of Education, that the removal of at least two of the trees is completely unnecessary and it will be keeping them. The department has also acknowledged—I suppose we should think of this as a bit of an advantage, because attention has been brought to it—that it needs to upgrade the retaining wall, and it also needs to improve the fence, which has been in danger of falling down for years.

So I am really pleased that some attention has been given to this safe Labor-held seat and to Bayswater Primary School. We are now in the situation where the future of one tree—the largest one—is now in question. The parents are still struggling to get any clear answers out of the department as to what is likely to happen, when it is likely to happen, and why the removal of this tree is deemed necessary.

The Department of Education needs to lift its game in dealing with local communities. It should not be so disinterested in the views of the people who live around these schools. I really wonder whether the department is always this indifferent to the necessity for consultation and also explanation.

I wrote to the Minister for Education some time ago about this matter. There is still no response. Likewise, my office has made numerous calls to the ministerial liaison, and no return call has been given as to what is going on. I compare this to the ministerial liaisons of some other ministers, who take their role seriously and are diligent in responding to queries raised by crossbench members. Therefore, I know and I acknowledge that this is not a systemic problem with the Barnett Government. But it does seem to be a particular problem with this ministerial office. So I have an enormous amount of sympathy with the parents and community members who are trying to get a decent answer and explanation from the Department of Education, because this seems to be an ongoing problem for everybody.

The parents have begun a petition online. Obviously I know that the petition is not admissible in Parliament. But they have done that off their own bat. I know that they are writing to the minister, and they are complaining that they are not getting responses either. So I am going to say to the Department of Education, “Leave the tree alone until you can at least ascertain whether it needs to go. If it is a genuine risk, I will be the first one to help you chop it down. But until that has been demonstrated, listen to the community and to what people are saying, and be accountable for the decisions that you are making.”

The subsequent negotiations have been like pulling teeth. It is really frustrating that the parents have had to struggle so hard to find out what on earth is going on. The Department of Education needs to get its act together and start treating the Bayswater community, and in particular the Bayswater Primary P&C, which is being truly representative, not only of the school but also of the community, with a little more respect.