

CHAMPION LAKES REGATTA CENTRE

Grievance

DR A.D. BUTI (Armadale) [9.38 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation and concerns the Champion Lakes Regatta Centre. The minister knows about the toxic bacterial levels in the lake. As the minister knows, it is a great venue for a number of triathlons, the Head of the River and major rowing events. Also, on 30 June, it will host a charity fun run, which the minister is more than welcome to come along to. Although it is a great venue, there are many problems with it, and one of the major problems is the number of times the lake has been closed to swimming because of dangerous toxic levels. Many people do not realise that there are beaches in Armadale, but there are two at Champion Lakes.

I am concerned about the number of times Champion Lakes Regatta Centre has been closed to swimming. This concern has also been raised in conversations I have had with various people who use the regatta centre. On 6 November 2012 the minister responded, in a question on notice, about how many times the regatta centre was tested, when it was being tested and how many times it has been unsafe for swimming. The minister's answer was that it had been closed 12 times in 2011, and a further seven times in the period to November 2012. The startling fact is that in two and a half years, Champion Lakes Regatta Centre has been closed 22 times, and all but one has been due to bacterial levels; the time it was not was because of a plumbing issue. The regatta centre has been closed for swimming 21 times in two and a half years because of unsafe levels of pretty nasty bacteria like thermophilic amoeba and enterococci; I am sure the minister, being a man of medicine, will understand what they are! As the minister would know, they are not nice. Some concern also exists about unhealthy levels of other bacteria that may be in the water.

Jaime Shurmer is a local journalist who writes for the *Comment News*, and she was alerted to this issue after I asked the question of the minister. I have to warn the minister that she is an Erin Brockovich type, so the minister should try to solve this issue because she will continue to investigate it and seek answers. It is difficult to obtain clear answers on this issue, because there seems to be a dispute about the cause of this unsafe level of bacteria in the Champion Lakes Regatta Centre. When VenuesWest took over the management of the regatta centre from the Armadale Redevelopment Authority, it commissioned a report from an environmental consulting firm, RPS Group, and that report was delivered in 2011. According to a report in *Comment News*, the RPS report stated —

“The main contributor to bacteria levels found in the lake is animal faeces. Unfortunately the regulation of animals that visit the area, particularly water birds, is highly impractical and therefore controlling the level of faecal contamination on the lake will be challenging.”

From my understanding, after conversations with Jaime Shurmer, VenuesWest has really thrown its hands in the air and does not believe it can control it if it is a bird issue.

What is interesting is that the Department of Environment and Conservation queried whether it was due to bird faeces. An article written by Jaime Shurmer that appeared in the *Comment News* on Tuesday, 21 May 2013 states —

But a DEC spokeswoman told *Comment News* on Friday the bacterial issues were common for ponds and small lakes, particularly during and after a hot, dry summer. “While Champion Lakes Regatta Centre acts as a haven for water fowl, it would be unusual for high bacteria levels in such a large body of water to be attributed to bird faeces ...

DEC is challenging the findings from the environmental consulting firm employed by VenuesWest, so a dispute exists between two government agencies and departments about the cause of the bacterial levels.

What is not disputed, unfortunately, is that there is a regular occurrence of high bacterial content in the Champion Lakes water bodies. I think it was on 18 April that the minister announced that \$1.5 million would be spent on improving the water quality at Champion Lakes, but I am not sure whether money will be spent on decreasing the salinity levels rather than bacterial issues. The salinity issue does prevent people swimming. As I said, the regatta centre is becoming a major venue for long-distance swimming training. Also, although people can still row and canoe even if the water is unsafe for swimming, a lot of parents will not allow their children to.

We need to receive answers from the minister either today or on another date on the main bacteria that are causing the problem, what is causing the problem—maybe it is something to do with the filtration system—and, more importantly, what the minister and his agency are doing about it.

MR T.K. WALDRON (Wagin — Minister for Sport and Recreation) [9.44 am]: I thank the member for Armadale for his grievance. I know he has a genuine interest in the facility, as do I. I thank the member for his interest, as I know he was a bit upset yesterday when we did not thank him for his interest during question time!

As the member said, ownership of the Champion Lakes Regatta Centre moved from the Armadale Redevelopment Authority to VenuesWest on 6 January 2012. To start with, I assure the member that VenuesWest has a very strong, very highly capable and responsible board and management, and I think it is doing a great job across this and the other 10 venues. Quite a rigorous water quality testing regime is in place, and it is carried out in accordance with the drainage, nutrient, irrigation and water quality management plan at Champion Lakes; water quality is tested regularly, on a fortnightly basis. It is a big body of water and safety is the number one issue; if there is a problem, people cannot swim in it. If a negative result occurs, then VenuesWest immediately takes appropriate action, which is to close the venue. Two types of contamination may exist—primary and secondary—and they may be at different levels, but VenuesWest will close the facility if there are any problems. I support VenuesWest doing that, because obviously the health and safety of people who utilise the water is the number one concern. After the facility is closed, the water is retested, and when the water is right again the venue is reopened pretty much immediately. The member is right: since VenuesWest has had the facility, it has been closed about 12 times. Both I and VenuesWest agree with the member in that the number of times it has had to be closed is not satisfactory, and things need to improve.

VenuesWest is taking the toxicity issue really seriously, and is looking at nutrient-stripping ponds as one of the options to enhance the performance of the existing ones, and whether they will have to put more in. As I understand it, the stripping ponds use the plant life and reeds et cetera to filter the rain that tends to wash animal excrement in. But the facility is in a built-up area and it is the only place the birds can feed, and the thinking is that that is the main problem. I will come back and talk about DEC before I finish.

VenuesWest has gone out for tenders to get advice on the best way of improving this and having a much better filtration system in those ponds. I understand a couple of quotes have come in, and so that will be proceeded with. That should determine whether they need additional ponds, whether they can upgrade the existing ponds or whether other methods can be utilised. Remember, VenuesWest has only been there 16 months and it has learnt about this issue during that period.

An amount of \$4 million was appropriated to VenuesWest when it took of the control of the regatta centre, and I want to make sure it prioritises and uses that money where it is most needed. The member mentioned the \$1.5 million to be used for the salinity issue. We do not want the venue to become completely stagnant and useless, so we have to control that as well. I think this issue should be another focus. I think we should be looking at some other things such as, particularly, shade and parking, but I will talk to the member about that later.

As I understand it, when the ARA was there a series of reports had to be submitted to DEC, but that, apparently, was not happening. VenuesWest picked up on that and sent an audit report through to DEC, and will continue to report as it is meant to, because that had not been happening in the right way previously. The report by the local journalist that the member for Armadale mentioned would have been done when the Armadale Redevelopment Authority was still in control and not VenuesWest.

When we agreed to take this over from VenuesWest we realised that VenuesWest manages venues such as swimming pools but a big body of water like this was something new to it. I think it is an outstanding facility. We do not want it shut. I will ensure that people are not put at risk on the way through. Steps have already been taken to do a better job of filtering the water in. From time to time there are problems. I am no expert; VenuesWest would know more about the bacteria et cetera than I do. It noticed that sometimes there are problems after rain when the rain washes in. VenuesWest is closely monitoring it. If it thought extra testing was needed after rain, it would do that to make sure things are secure.

This week I met with Canoeing Western Australia. Although sporting bodies were cautious about the change in management, Canoeing WA was full of praise for what VenuesWest is doing out there, how it is very meticulous in what it does. The young manager out there onsite is really outstanding. He has really taken this venue on board and wants to make something of it. Because of the cost in running a facility like that, we want to utilise it as much as possible. We are aware of the issue; I thank the member for raising it. I will continue to advise the member for Armadale personally about how we are going with this. If I need a hand with some issues, I will let the member know. For the benefit of the member's constituents, it is a great venue for them to have there. I will not go through all the events that are held there. Heading out to my electorate, I sometimes see the member for Armadale running along Armadale Road preparing for his marathons. The great thing about the venue is that it has flexibility. It is not just the water; it is the bike riding and recreation around it—the triathlons and everything. We do not want a situation in which a big event coming up suddenly has to be canned. We have a job to do; we are well aware of it. I am really confident that VenuesWest is on top of it. We will seek assistance from the experts and hopefully I can report to the member that the situation has improved dramatically.