

## WITTENOOM — CLOSURE

### *Statement*

**HON PETER FOSTER (Mining and Pastoral)** [6.32 pm]: Tonight I want to take the opportunity to speak to the long-running history of Wittenoom, provide some insight into how successive Labor governments have worked to decommission the town and outline this government's part in that story.

Members may recall that during my second reading contribution to the debate on the Wittenoom Closure Bill, I talked about how unsafe it is to live in Wittenoom due to the asbestos contamination. Members may recall that during that debate, I also spoke about the last remaining resident, a former colleague of mine by the name of Lorraine Thomas. During my time on the council of the Shire of Ashburton, I spent a lot of time with Lorraine. We often drove together from Tom Price to Onslow to attend council meetings, which is a 470-odd kilometre trip each way, or about a five-hour journey, and Lorraine would share with me her stories about Wittenoom, where she had lived for 40 years. She told me stories about late-night ambulance call-outs, rescuing tourists who were stuck in gorges and in distress, and navigating road washouts. She also told me stories about travelling in light aircraft during rough weather, because in order to travel to council meetings in the early days, Lorraine had to hop in a little plane and fly from Wittenoom to Onslow for meetings. She also told me about having to deal with squatters who would arrive in the middle of the night and set up camp on one of her properties, and about how drunk visitors would often knock on her door late at night to call on her and she would have to shoo them away.

When the town was de-gazetted, the phones were turned off, and the water and power were disconnected. However, Lorraine continued to live in the town. She lived off grid. The Lorraine that I know was a tough and resilient person, and she persisted. She persisted even when the town was threatened by a grassfire that burnt down the gem store that she owned. As I said, she persisted.

I do not need to remind members that Wittenoom is known to be one of the most contaminated places in the Southern Hemisphere. As has been outlined by a number of members on this side of the house, it is only Labor governments that have acted to close Wittenoom and deal with the issues. It was a Labor government that shut down the power grid in Wittenoom and it was a Labor government that de-gazetted the town. It is clear that it was a Labor government that had to make the hard decision to close the town permanently by the passage of the Wittenoom Closure Bill 2021. This is why I wanted to make this statement tonight to outline this government's part in the Wittenoom story.

This certainly has not been something that has happened overnight. Consultation with remaining residents about the closure of the town has been going on for years. The Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage has been in continuous contact with residents throughout the process. I can also attest as a former councillor of the Shire of Ashburton that we were often contacted by that department through our council processes. Of course, the consultation included making the residents aware of the Wittenoom Closure Bill, which was a long time coming and was passed by the government to facilitate the acquisition of the properties of the remaining residents.

It is clear from the media reporting that the remaining residents and buildings in the town acted as a point of interest that continued to attract to the town visitors who clearly ignored the health risks. Therefore, although it was tough for the remaining residents, it was necessary that the government closed the town to ensure the safety of the public. As we all know, there is no safe exposure to asbestos. The health and safety of the general public is absolutely paramount in this situation.

It should be noted that through the Wittenoom Closure Bill, \$855 000 was payable to the last remaining resident as consideration for the vacant possession of her properties. In order to assist the last remaining resident, the department also offered early access to \$50 000 of this funding to assist with the removal of her belongings. As part of the department's ongoing communications with the remaining resident and her daughter, a further extension of time to support the vacation of the premises was requested and a significant extension was supported by the department.

As has been put on the record, at the expiry of the extension, staff from the department and contractors attended the site to begin decommissioning works and take vacant possession of the remaining buildings. Two sheriffs from the Department of Justice, along with ambulance staff, also attended to serve the warrant. They did not forcibly evict Lorraine. When served with the notice, Lorraine agreed to leave voluntarily, with the promise that she could return to collect her belongings, which she later did. Ambulance staff attended the site because it was the right thing to do, considering the health and safety risks at the site, as well as Lorraine's age. At no time during the serving of the warrant or on the journey to Port Hedland to her daughter's residence did Lorraine express any distress. I note that there has been some focus on the use of hazmat suits by those who attended the town that day. I want to address this by reiterating as strongly as I can that one single asbestos fibre can cause disease. Those suits were absolutely necessary for the safety of all those involved. Again, this was the right thing to do in considering the health and safety of all those in attendance.

I note the comments that Hon Wilson Tucker has made in this house and point out that he has come to this matter quite late in the piece. Successive Labor governments have made tough decisions about Wittenoom and will continue to do what is right for the health and safety of all Western Australians.

*House adjourned at 6.39 pm*

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