

PETRA WESTKEY — WORKERS ACCOMMODATION, KALBARRI

Grievance

MS M. BEARD (North West Central) [9.59 am]: Today I grieve to the Minister for Lands to seek answers on behalf of the Kalbarri community on the status of the much-hyped workers accommodation project at Wood Street. Two and a half years have passed since the original promise was made by then Premier Mark McGowan on 10 March 2021, yet this project still looks as far away from completion as it did on that sunny day in March, as was promoted on the Facebook post I have here. After so long, how has nothing progressed on this project? We seem to be back at square one. This seems to be another clear example of the government making another significant promise versus a gap in delivery. The Kalbarri community has been patient and has worked hard to bounce back after cyclone Seroja, and this is an important piece of the puzzle for its recovery. After the recent revelations around the status of Petra Westkey (WA) and the government’s withdrawal from negotiations, the community want to know what that means for the project. The minister has been the Minister for Lands since December 2021. He was in local government prior to that, and has strong links to this project. As the minister responsible for the appointment of Petra Westkey, the lack of action and communication with the community of Kalbarri is concerning.

This brings me back to a question asked in this place during the last sitting week when it seemed that the minister may have been caught off guard and was unaware of the operational status of his hand-picked proponent. *Business News* has seemingly done more due diligence on this, as has the revelation unearthed by the opposition. I come back to the original promise of 10 March 2021. How does the history of this project align with the minister’s commitment to fast track the development, as published in this Facebook post back in March 2021?

Politics serves up some good synergies at times, and this was the case last sitting week when it came to the opposition’s attention that Petra Westkey looked to have shut up shop in the north of Perth. This new information came to light around 16 August, which coincided with the 12-month anniversary of the announcement that Petra Westkey was the preferred proponent for the redevelopment of the Wood Street site. A media release on March 2022 stated —

“Kalbarri’s economy relies heavily on seasonal tourism, and by delivering a new worker accommodation facility, we are supporting the long-term sustainability of local businesses and industry in the town.

...

“We look forward to working with industry to see this great opportunity realised.”

This is again a great intent, but there is seemingly a lack of delivery, which is simply not good enough for the Kalbarri community, which needs some form of certainty. The community has a number of outstanding questions, which rightly deserve answers. The community needs certainty that at some point there will be workers accommodation. What due diligence did the minister do to make sure the proponent would be able to deliver the promise, before it was hand-picked in August 2022? Why did the state government withdraw from negotiations with its preferred proponent around Monday, 28 August 2023? Has the land title been given to Petra Westkey, and what stage is this up to?

One of the community leaders in Kalbarri, Melissa Finlay, has kept close tabs on the project and is an active and forward-leading community role model. Melissa penned a letter to the Minister for Regional Development, which stated —

The commitment to provide suitable and affordable housing for workers in our region was met with great enthusiasm and hope by the local community. This initiative was not only expected to enhance the quality of life for workers but also contribute to the overall growth and development of our region. The shortage of appropriate housing has been a long-standing issue, adversely affecting the well-being of those who contribute to the development and progress of our community. The sudden suspension of operations by the appointed company has caused a wave of uncertainty and disappointment among the local residents who were eagerly looking forward to the positive changes that this accommodation project promised to bring. The current situation raises questions about the future of this project, the fate of the allocated resources, and the subsequent impact on our regional development goals.

These are not my words; these are the words of a concerned community member looking for answers. The community wants clear and transparent communication. It wants to know what will happen to the resources if the proponent does not progress. It wants to know what due diligence was undertaken by the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage before choosing Petra Westkey, and what is the department and the minister are doing to get to the bottom of this mess? How does the lack of transparent answers about the interactions between the minister’s department and Petra Westkey, as highlighted by responses in the other place to Hon Martin Aldridge, align with gold-standard transparency rhetoric, which was to be a hallmark of this government? The eagerness and excitement that existed for this project has been replaced by exasperation, exhaustion and false dawns. Although I can pre-empt the minister’s response to today’s grievance and the pivot that the minister will no doubt claim to have delivered on the election

commitment to make land available for workers accommodation in Kalbarri, this does not wash with the local community given the announcement made in 2021.

The clear intent and impression given during the state election was that the government would deliver workers accommodation in Kalbarri, which has not happened and seemingly may not happen. My impression is that perhaps the government realised that this project was going to be a struggle to deliver, and I acknowledge that there are issues within the building industry at the moment. Even then, with the reduced target in the delivery of the land and in securing a proponent, the community sees it as a failure of a promised delivery. When we have local businesses renting six properties to house the temporary workers it needs, it pushes more long-term renters out of the market, which compounds the demand and housing pressure the regions have grappled with over recent years. Amidst another busy tourism season and the worst housing crisis WA has ever seen, small businesses and local governments are once again left carrying the burden. The community is at its wits' end, and its tolerance for this uncertainty on the project is rightly at a low ebb.

On behalf of the Kalbarri community, I implore the minister to take urgent action to sort out this project and provide the community with some clarity and a pathway forward, with close consultation to deliver the outcome it was promised and it expects. Over the next 560-odd days, I will keep raising the status of the project to ensure that community members understand where this will land and what it might mean for them. I feel it is not the time for spin and we need a commonsense and collaborative approach to try to find solutions for people who are desperately in need of workers accommodation.

MR J.N. CAREY (Perth — Minister for Lands) [10.05 am]: I thank the member for the grievance. I have to say that I am disappointed by the approach of the member for North West Central and her misrepresentation about this and incorrect information in media releases. As a minister, my office and our approach is to always work to be collaborative. Opposition members have come up to me this week to thank my office for the approach that we take to work with members of Parliament on a range of very difficult issues. In fact, a prominent member of the upper house came up to me to thank me for my office's approach. Therefore, I am disappointed that the member took a different approach and misrepresents the position that we took to the community, and that she actually made a false statement in her media release. It is very disappointing. It does the member no good, and it does not help the member's advocacy for her local community.

I want to put on the record, very clearly, the circumstances. Our department worked closely with the Shire of Northampton to identify suitable locations for a workforce accommodation facility. Lot 997 Nanda Drive was the site originally identified by the shire. In July 2021, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage expedited granting the shire a management order with the power to lease for up to five years over lot 997 to enable the pursuit of short-term temporary accommodation. However, and rightly, the shire conducted further investigations, and notified the department that lot 997 was not suitably serviced with sewerage, water and power to support the development. The shire also raised concerns regarding the difficulties of the terrain.

As a result of the shire's investigations, my agency made available a proportion of lot 511 Wood Street adjacent to the recreation area and Murchison River Caravan Park. This was to be via registrations of interest from early to mid-2022. This site has an area of 6 740 square metres and is under the management of the shire. The shire agreed to surrender the management of this proportion of the reserve. However, due to the restricted zoning, workforce accommodation was not permitted at the site. My agency then assisted the shire to prepare a local planning scheme amendment that rezoned the site to enable the development of workforce accommodation. The amendment was initiated in early 2022, endorsed by the council in mid-2022 and lodged for final approval with the Western Australian Planning Commission in August 2022. A recommendation was then made to the Minister for Planning in late October 2022. That gives members some context and history of the project, which was not the approach the member for North West Central made, which just glistened over it. The process was that my agency worked with the shire. The original site was deemed inappropriate and then we had to work through a planning process for the new site.

Prior to the impact of the cyclone, we made a very clear commitment to make state-owned land available, and we launched the expressions of interest process. We delivered on that commitment. It was a competitive process and Petra Westkey was named the successful proponent. The department undertook due diligence, as it would for any housing project. The agency's advice was that Petra Westkey was no longer considered viable. After receiving that formal advice, my office and I acted decisively to approve the withdrawal from negotiations.

I find the use of the terminology "hand-picked" offensive because there was a clear process. I understand there was wheeling and dealing under the opposition's government, and we saw that with the financial risk Goldmaster left to taxpayers. There was a clear process; I did not intervene in that process and hand-pick a proponent. It was a recommendation from the agency, with a clear probity process.

I want to be clear on this: the department did not enter into any financial or contract agreement with Petra Westkey. It was a private development for which the state provided the land. We see a continued misrepresentation by the

local member on this issue. The government made a commitment to make the land available, and it was a very detailed and exhaustive process, as I described. There was no financial risk or loss to WA taxpayers. Again, I compare it with the opposition's process with Goldmaster. I will come back to Parliament to report on the loss to taxpayers that was a direct result of its government's mismanagement.

We undertook the due diligence. These processes are long, and a significant amount of time is invested to make sure of the finances and to work with the proponent before we enter into any contract or hand over the land. That is the difference between our side of politics and the opposition's side; we have a very clear process. The process is not quick for the exact reason that we want to ensure that due diligence is undertaken. We undertook and stand by that process.