

CHILDREN'S CROSSING — STIRLING HIGHWAY

Grievance

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [10.04 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Police. I thank the minister for taking my grievance. My grievance relates to the children's crossing on Stirling Highway, directly outside Presbyterian Ladies' College, or PLC, which is a pre-kindergarten to year 12 girls' school located in Peppermint Grove. This crossing also services the nearby North Cottesloe Primary School, which caters for kindergarten to year 6 students.

By way of background, on 31 January this year, which was PLC's first day of school for the new year, the school's principal, Ms Cate Begbie, received a letter from the WA children's crossing unit at the end of the school day. The letter advised that the traffic warden who works at the children's crossing on Stirling Highway, near McNeil Street, had resigned and the other warden had consequently been moved as he could not operate this crossing on his own due to safety concerns. The letter further advised that the children's crossing unit had no relief staff available to cover the position and that the school should take appropriate action and inform the students and the school community to be vigilant while crossing without a warden present. To this day, some three weeks later, there continues to be no traffic warden at this crossing.

As was indicated in the letter, the children's crossing unit is acutely aware of the dangers presented at this children's crossing, which is why the unit would not allow a single traffic warden to work the crossing alone. Although the school and I fully appreciate the crossing unit's concern for the traffic warden's safety, this has left the students and staff of PLC and other neighbouring schools in a very dangerous and potentially fatal situation. Many dozens of students need to cross this point of Stirling Highway in the mornings and afternoons as the school bus stops are located on the highway opposite the school. Students have tried walking to either Eric Street or Napoleon Street, but, consequently, have missed their buses in the afternoon. The nearest controlled intersections are 400 and 600 metres away respectively. Again, this is a safety issue as we do not want young girls standing alone on the sidewalk of Stirling Highway having missed their bus ride home.

With the assistance of her staff, the school's principal has been standing at the crossing every morning and afternoon for the last three weeks in an attempt to try to monitor the situation and assist students. Unfortunately, school staff are not legally allowed to do anything to stop or control the traffic. The school is now at a stage at which it is relying on the oncoming traffic to willingly stop when they see the students waiting. This is a very heavily used dual carriageway in a 60-kilometre-an-hour zone on a downhill slope. Once the traffic has stopped, on both lanes and in both directions, the students need to cross very quickly before cars start moving again. I am sure that everyone in this room can understand and appreciate just how dangerous this situation really is and the potential it has to cause serious injury and even death. The dangers present at this crossing are, in fact, so bad that the school has already, understandably, had some staff advise that they feel it is too unsafe for them to be attending the crossing to help the students. The principal cannot and will not force her staff to perform this duty, but, equally, she cannot stand by while her students are placed in harm's way on a daily basis. Consequently, with the assistance of other staff members, Principal Begbie has been staffing the children's crossing personally on a daily basis, even though they are unable to actually direct traffic in any way.

Unfortunately, confusion at the crossing and the McNeil Street intersection, which is very close by, has already resulted in two car accidents in the last two weeks. Both accidents have occurred during the student crossing times. The school's principal was present following the second crash. Ms Begbie has advised me that it was an incredibly dangerous situation, as the two cars sat in the middle of the highway at the crossing area, adding further to the chaos. What was even more worrying was that there was no police attendance while the two cars were cleared by tow trucks. Other cars were also forced to run over the debris from the accident. As a result, the debris flew onto the sidewalk where the children were standing. Following the accident, the principal rang the local police to seek an update and was told that the job had been escalated, but no-one arrived in the time that it took to clear the accident. The school then redirected the girls to walk back down to Napoleon Street on this day to cross safely, but, again, the school had to have its own staff on duty at points to redirect students and manage what they could as safely as they could. I appreciate that the police are very busy, but I think that a car accident in peak-hour traffic at a student crossing on a major highway should have been of a high enough priority for someone to attend as a matter of urgency. Further accidents have also almost occurred on another three separate occasions, as no traffic wardens were there to manage the crossing and it was peak hour in the morning. It is a chaotic situation. Some 31 000 cars travel on this stretch of road a day. As mentioned previously, it is a dual carriageway with traffic travelling at 60 kilometres an hour, if not faster at times.

On Monday, I was invited by the school to come down at the end of the school day to personally assist in helping the girls cross the road so I could see the danger for myself. The considerable danger to both students and staff at the crossing was all too apparent. Consequently, I am seeking the minister's assistance to work out a solution to this problem before someone gets seriously hurt or, even worse, killed.

There are a couple of ways this could be resolved. In the first instance, I believe the dangers presented at this crossing warrant that it be staffed as an urgent priority by the Western Australia Police Force children's crossing unit, even if this has to be ahead of a less dangerous crossing. The crossing presents traffic wardens and students alike with a very dangerous situation given the volume of traffic using this stretch of road and the fact that it is a dual carriageway. It is also on a downhill slope upon which cars gain considerable speed. Consequently, the school requests that a full signalised pedestrian crossing be installed at the crossing in the future to ensure the safety of all concerned and to also ensure that this type of situation is not repeated in the future.

In the meantime, until the children's crossing unit finds new traffic wardens, it asks that the Western Australia Police Force be called upon to provide temporary support at the crossing. Accordingly, I respectfully call on the minister to ensure that this crossing is staffed as a matter of urgency and that the state government begins planning for the installation of a full signalised pedestrian crossing at this children's crossing. Thank you.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Police) [10.11 am]: I thank the member for Cottesloe for raising this matter with me. It is a serious matter worthy of a grievance. At the outset, can I let the member know that I share a great deal of interest in this matter because I share an identical challenge—namely, the Secret Harbour Primary School crossing on Warnbro Sound Avenue, which is a dual carriageway road at 60 kilometres an hour with heavy traffic in the mornings and evenings. It is not necessarily quite as much traffic as Stirling Highway, but the traffic gets up speed going along there. Even when it is staffed with traffic wardens on occasions, as reported in the media, those traffic wardens have been subject to some appalling behaviour. Their lives have been put at risk and threatened. I have a great deal of sympathy for the observations made by the member on the challenge, security and safety.

I have to tell the member up-front that, like all policing operational matters, the way the traffic warden unit operates is an operational matter. It would be neither appropriate nor possible for me to direct the unit to attribute greater priority to any one site over another. Could the member imagine if I did it for mine and not his? It would be appalling and wrong. We leave it to them. It is a policing matter. It is also a challenging matter. The member would probably be aware of a question asked by his colleague Hon Donna Faragher in the other place. She asked a question about traffic wardens on 16 February. She asked about how many wardens we are short and the like. The answer was pretty revealing. The Western Australia Police Force advised that the children's crossing unit requires an additional 65 traffic wardens to fulfil capacity of existing crossings. This would have been before the member's warden resigned, leaving the other warden alone. Before that, they were looking for 65 wardens across 25 suburbs in the city for existing crossings. Suburbia is growing and there is constantly more demand with additional crossings being added, so the challenge is growing all the time. Many of those suburbs are very high traffic areas. The challenge is huge.

The police, children's crossing unit and police media have engaged in numerous mainstream media opportunities on TV, radio and the like to advertise and seek out new people, but we are confronting another challenge. Most people who are traffic wardens are elderly people augmenting pensions; they do not get paid a huge amount. During the COVID pandemic, a lot of them dropped off. Understandably, many of them chose to withdraw to avoid exposure to the potential risk of COVID and they have not all come back. The natural consequence of the demographic that we attract to the task growing older also means that, increasingly, as baby boomers age, they are ageing out, so fewer are available in a workforce pool to do that task. We all love and appreciate the crossing unit model—rightly, the member's community does. I totally concede that it is a really challenging site, which is dangerous for children if there is not support. The member would understand and I think he would appreciate that it is an operational decision in the event that if there is only one warden, and there should be two, the single person has to be moved. I think there should be two at that crossing; I do not think anyone could argue against that suggestion from the crossing unit. A warden cannot remain there on their own because it would be dangerous. This creates a problem by trying to solve one. That is a challenge.

The member asked me to come up with solutions. I talked to the commissioner's office. I do not go down to the crossing unit and tell them how to do their job because to do so would be wrong. We are looking at what can be done. It is going to be a tough ask. There will increasingly be fewer people who see this job as an attractive option. The member's suggestion that we employ technology is a good one. We will have to look at what we do and how we can replace people with other measures, which might be achievable as the ageing population creates more challenges. I can tell the member that on receipt of his correspondence, I have drawn the matter to the attention of the commissioner's office, which is the way I can do it. I cannot go down and tell the crossing unit what to do as that would not be right. I have drawn the matter to the attention of the commissioner's office and asked for their consideration.

The member can convey to his constituents, particularly the principal and her staff, my thanks for what they have been doing. I cannot say they will be empowered to stop traffic or anything like that. I would suggest that, as much as it might be difficult and administratively tough to change buses and the like, the Eric Street and Napoleon Street traffic lights are probably a safer option for kids trying to get to the bus stop on the other side of the road, although,

as mentioned, that adds to the journey and time and the like and may be administratively difficult. It is a personal observation, not a solution. It is a solution, but not the solution necessarily.

Dr D.J. Honey: It's stopping the kids from doing that.

Mr P. PAPALIA: Yes, I know. Getting kids to do a safe thing is not always easy. I know exactly what the member is saying. Can the member please thank them and convey to his constituents that I have brought it to the attention of the commissioner and asked that their concerns be taken into consideration.