

**PORT HEDLAND**

*Statement*

**HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral)** [10.03 pm]: I rise to report on a recent trip to Port Hedland on 5 November on which I was able to host my colleagues. I want to talk a little bit about what is going on in Port Hedland. All of us would be aware of the tremendous success of the incredible iron ore exports from the port of Port Hedland. The current reported figure is 45 million tonnes per month. We were hosted by BHP and had a tour of its site. I am sure most members have had the honour and opportunity to see that site. We also saw firsthand the operating port. We went out on the port. It had been a few years since I had done that. It was certainly very enlightening to talk to staff from the marine section of BHP about some of the challenges and opportunities that are going on in Port Hedland.

If we look at what comes out of Port Hedland, we can see that it earns over \$100 million a year in exports. It is the largest bulk export port in the world, apparently.

**Hon Martin Aldridge:** It's billions.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** Sorry; did I say million?

**Hon Kyle McGinn:** That's in a day.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** I meant to say \$100 billion. I thank the member for the correction. That is the gross domestic product of a mid-sized country. It is a tremendous boon to Western Australia.

I guess the important part is looking at the disparity and some of the challenges that we see in that town. We saw some of the challenges. We talked to some people. I attempt to get to Port Hedland as often as I can, whether by road from my home town of Broome or on the Aviair flight on Monday morning and then on to Parliament on Tuesday. There are some massive challenges and it is worth putting some things on the record. For example, apparently there are four intensive care unit beds at Hedland Health Campus. That is a challenge for the future, particularly after we go into the post-pandemic period, when we may be managing small outbreaks of COVID on a more regular basis, which is likely to be the situation. I think there has been some discussion in the media about the hospital and some of the challenges at that venue.

There are practical challenges around infrastructure and the ability to grow the capacity of exports from the port. The number of vessels per tide is a limiting factor on how much can go out of that port. There was concern about the availability of industrial land, particularly for some of the heavy industries. Hon Alannah MacTiernan has talked about the hydrogen industry in the region. She has backed the proposal to industrialise Eighty Mile Beach and the Ramsar wetlands, which is obviously a concern. If I were in her shoes, my preference would be to get on with the study and continue work on the previously started Boodarie Strategic Industrial Area and look at creating an opportunity for heavy industry within Port Hedland to keep heavy industry concentrated around towns and centres, rather than dispersing it across more environmentally sensitive places.

While we were there, the shortage of child care was raised. This is a problem across the region. It does not matter where you go, there is a shortage of child care. Apparently, Port Hedland is short 300 child care places at the moment.

I think one of the greatest concerns is the low vaccination rates in the Pilbara; they are the lowest in the country. They should be an absolute priority for the government, given that Port Hedland plays such a key role for our economy. The latest figures I have from 1 November, which are on the health.gov.au website, are for statistical area 3. For the west Pilbara, we are looking at a fully vaccinated rate of 27 per cent. For the East Pilbara, the fully vaccinated rate is 30 per cent. These are quite terrifying numbers in view of the challenges of opening up in the future and the potential of a premature outbreak. Those vaccination rates are simply too low, and I do not think I would hear any objections from the other side of the chamber about that.

One of the most disheartening aspects of our visit was meeting with a former nurse who was aged over 65 and was happy to go on the record about her situation. She had recently been made homeless because of rising private rents. This person was on a pension and had suddenly been required to pay \$700 a week for a small house, which she could not afford, and she went on a priority waitlist. She was given the run-around; she was living in her car with three pets. I am sure that all members who have been to Port Hedland in the middle of summer will appreciate how unpleasant that would be in 47-degree heat, quite apart from the fact that it is very unsafe for a vulnerable person to be living in a car with their pets.

I am pleased to report that after a little lobbying by my good friend Camilo Blanco, the former Mayor of Port Hedland — Several members interjected.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** He is an advocate, actually, and I think people should reflect on the words they say.

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order!

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** People should reflect on the fact that he has stood up for his community and is standing up for this vulnerable lady who is living on the streets.

Several members interjected.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order!

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** He is standing up for her and bringing some attention to her situation. Fortunately, she was provided a home but it was reported to me today that when she went to that home she copped a bit of abuse from some people nearby. These are some of the challenges we face with, at times, antisocial behaviour in the community. It is the disparity of wealth and lack of investment that worries me.

I asked a question today about the number of public housing houses that were available, and 668 have been built in Port Hedland, which is a considerable number. My view, just from driving around South Hedland, is that they really need a bit of TLC because many of them leave a lot to be desired; some of them quite frankly are in a very, very poor state. The answer I got today is that apparently there are 48 empty homes: 30 undergoing maintenance, and 18 under assessment. One might say that that is not a huge percentage of that 668, but given the reports I have heard about the number of people living in their cars, I would strongly advise the minister to talk to the director general of the Department of Communities and do whatever possible to fast-track the availability of those properties. It is only when we care for the most vulnerable in our community that we can enjoy and appreciate the wealth we generate in this state. I would like the government to invest more in the regions, which is very pertinent to today's debate on the Constitutional and Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Equality) Bill 2021. We must invest more in our regions.

*House adjourned at 10.14 pm*

---