

MIRRABOOKA WATER TREATMENT PLANT

Grievance

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan) [9.51 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Water and it relates to the Mirrabooka water treatment plant, which is in the electorate of my colleague the member for Nollamara. The impact of the treatment plant stretches into the suburb of Ballajura, which is within my electorate.

I will give the minister a bit of the background, which centres on the need for an aged-care facility in Ballajura. Ballajura is the third-largest suburb in Western Australia and it does not have a dedicated aged-care facility. For a long time the community has been demanding and asking for an aged-care facility within the suburb of Ballajura. Since 2002 there have been significant ongoing negotiations and discussions about the location for an aged-care facility in Ballajura.

To reinforce the need for an aged-care facility in Ballajura, currently there are 3 000 people aged 55 years or over in Ballajura. Long-term residents have to move out of that suburb if they want to move into an aged-care facility because of the lack of a dedicated facility in Ballajura. When I think about this issue, I think of June Retallack who has been fighting for an aged-care facility for years only to be thwarted by either state government agencies or the local council.

Over the past six months there have been some great developments. In mid-2009 the Minister for Lands made an offer to sell state government-owned land to the City of Swan. That land is at the corner of Alexander Drive and Paradise Quay in Ballajura. This land is seen as highly appropriate for an aged-care facility because of its proximity to Alexander Drive, which is a major public transport route, and also its proximity to shops. Therefore, elderly people could access public transport and the local shops from this site. Following lobbying from me, the Minister for Lands agreed to this new offer in the middle of last year. The City of Swan proposed to begin purchase arrangements of the 2.77 hectare site at its council meeting on 23 September last year.

The City of Swan advertised for comment on the potential purchase of the land for the purpose of an aged-care facility and received 13 submissions. It was only at that time that the issue of the buffer zone around the Mirrabooka water treatment plant was raised. It was unfortunate that this issue had not been raised previously, because this proposal had been on everybody's agenda since 2002 when the issue of the buffer zone around the Mirrabooka water treatment plant was raised. When the City of Swan was about to gain access to the state government-owned land, the issue of a buffer zone around the Mirrabooka water treatment plant was raised. There is a 200-metre buffer around the chlorine storage treatment plant. I understand that there are nine 920-kilogram drums stored on that site. The result is that there cannot be any residence built within that buffer zone. However, within that buffer zone there can be public use, such as sporting fields or public open space. I understand that the buffer zone affects only residences. The existence of this buffer zone means that the site that has been dedicated to an aged-care facility is seriously affected. Discussions have taken place about creating a facility around the buffer, but it would probably not be an optimal facility because the buffer would impact on the size of the facility. In addition, the aged-care facility would have to back onto the current residences.

This buffer also means that the land on the corner of Alexander Drive and Paradise Quay, the only vacant land in Ballajura, would basically be useless for decades to come. I urge the Minister for Water to look at this issue and see what he can do on behalf of the state government to reduce the buffer. A number of options were put forward by the Water Corporation to the City of Swan and they include, for example, a change in the type of chlorine that is stored at the Mirrabooka water treatment plant, thereby allowing a reduction in the size of the buffer. There are issues around moving those drums within that site. I want to make sure that it would not impact adversely on the people of Koondoola, which is to the west of the site. Perhaps there are options for moving the chlorine. It would be preferable that the type of chlorine be changed, thereby reducing the size of the buffer. I know this will incur a cost, but because of where the treatment plant is located—that is, near Alexander Drive—it impacts the future use of this land. As I said, there is not a lot of vacant land in Ballajura that would be suitable for an aged-care facility. This issue needs to be addressed in either the next few years or decades. It would be cheaper to address it now rather than wait 20 or 30 years. If we do not address this issue, the land will be useless for generations to come.

I urge the minister to look at this issue. In my dealings with the minister previously, he has dealt with the issues raised with him in a very direct and professional way. I ask the minister to look at this issue to see whether something can be done to reduce this buffer to allow this land to be the home of a suitable and appropriately sized aged-care facility and new senior citizens centre for the people of Ballajura.

DR G.G. JACOBS (Eyre — Minister for Water) [9.58 am]: I thank the member for West Swan for her grievance and I share her concerns about the balance between residential and commercial development in this state and the need to have safety buffers around plants and projects in order to protect the population. It is important to note that the Mirrabooka groundwater treatment plant was built in the 1970s. It has been there

since 1974 and, as the member said, is located on Alexander Drive. It sources water from the Mirrabooka bore field, including Whiteman Park, and draws predominantly from the Leederville aquifer. In fact, chlorine is used as part of the treatment to put water into the Perth water scheme. Part of the public health responsibility is that the water be chlorinated. A chlorine liquid is converted to a chlorine gas and the chemicals are handled at this treatment plant. It is the storage of nine 900-kilogram cylinders that requires a 200-metre buffer around the Mirrabooka treatment plant to protect the nearby residents in case of a chlorine leak. That is set under the responsibilities of the environment and mines departments. In fact, it is licensed under the Department of Mines and Petroleum's Dangerous Goods Safety Regulations.

As the member for West Swan said, this land, otherwise essentially public open space east of Alexander Drive, has been looked at to develop a much-needed aged-care facility. We now have a chlorine buffer that could be an impediment to that development. I discussed with the member last night the possible options. Obviously, we could move the plant. It would need to be moved some hundreds of metres to the west to take away the buffer that is impeding and encroaching on the proposed development. The other possibility, as the member for West Swan intimated, is another way to treat the water—that is, with sodium hypochlorite. Sodium hypochlorite comes in liquid form, and during the treatment process it stays liquid. It is a bit like the treatment used in major swimming pools in suburban Western Australia. There is no gaseous process involved and therefore no possibility of a gaseous leak. In that case, there is no need to have any buffer at all. There are some issues in and around the increased costs of that process, as there often is. The sodium hypochlorite process is a more expensive process. We would have to consider who would bear the cost of that process. One could say that it is the Water Corporation's responsibility. I will put it in context a bit. That does not mean I have shut the door on this option—we are prepared to consider this option. It is a genuine grievance. The City of Swan obviously will gain benefits from the development of this area. The question is: why should the Water Corporation bear the cost? The treatment plant has been there since 1974. Is there a way of saying, “Hang on; this is not necessarily all the Water Corporation's responsibility, as it is administering a facility to provide safe water for Western Australia”?

I also understand that when we step back from that, it is important that we do not impede development. Member for West Swan, it is about who should bear the cost of this. The moving of the plant will involve a significant cost. The changing of the process will also involve significant ongoing costs. We need to look at those things. Who will bear this cost? Should the Water Corporation bear the cost for a plant that has been there for over 30 years because now it has been decided that the City of Swan should use particular land within the buffer, which is properly convened, in the development of this aged-care facility?

Member for West Swan, we are happy to look at the issues. We need to bear in mind the fact that the Water Corporation should not necessarily have to bear all the cost in a development that benefits many parties. I think it is important that we go through that process. As the minister, I am happy to go through those processes with the City of Swan to get a solution that is good for everybody.