

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

INQUIRY INTO FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION

SESSION TWO

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 10 MAY 2006**

Members

Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Cowper (Deputy Chairman)
Mr S.R. Hill
Ms K. Hodson-Thomas
Mrs J. Hughes

Hearing commenced at 10.57 am

PETERSEN, MR PHILLIP LAWRENCE, ESM

President, State Emergency Service Volunteers Association, examined:

The CHAIRMAN: The committee hearing is a proceeding of the Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Petersen: Yes, I have.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes attached to it?

Mr Petersen: Yes, I do.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

Mr Petersen: I have read that, yes.

The CHAIRMAN: We have received a submission from you. Would you like to make some opening comments or give a verbal submission to the committee?

Mr Petersen: This review has taken time since that first submission was made. Essentially, I support some of the changes that FESA is offering in terms of a name change and the opportunity for volunteers to be part of the advisory board. I support that because one of the strong elements of the association is that volunteer input to the organisation is important; even in this current structure we were the instigators of the volunteer representation on the current board. That is one of our strong points. I will leave it there and answer the questions.

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: You have answer question 4, so that is fine.

Mr Petersen: What was question 4?

Ms K. HODSON-THOMAS: Whether you supported the name change.

Mr Petersen: Yes, we do and I guess the reason that it has been well supported is the "F" in FESA or the fire component. A lot of the SES volunteers felt that was causing a loss of identity to the State Emergency Service volunteers. It was masking their role and people were perceiving FESA and fire to be the one organisation and they did not see the association was the State Emergency Service under the FESA role.

The CHAIRMAN: In question 4, FESA has recommended the establishment of the department of emergency services. I take it you support that?

Mr Petersen: I do not fully understand all the processes in government that changes an authority and a department and all the ins and outs of what that means. However, I support the concept that generates a change of name. Where the advisory board still exists for volunteers to input to the organisation, the name does not really matter in terms of "authority" or "department".

The CHAIRMAN: Can we talk a little about the emergency services levy. The ESL process calls for local government to complete emergency services levy grants scheme applications for SES unit funding. The ESL grants scheme committee must then approve or reject the application for funding. If the committee approves the amount requested, the funding is provided to the local government and local government then forwards it on to the SES unit. FESA has recommended that local government be taken out of the ESL application process and that SES units deal directly with FESA on ESL funding; that is, you would be making the applications directly to FESA. The

majority of local governments that we have spoken to during the inquiry support this occurring. Do you have a comment on that?

Mr Petersen: I do. We certainly appreciated the emergency services levy that was introduced by the government. That has made a difference financially to all the SES units across the state. Before the emergency services levy it was relying on the support of local governments to sponsor the units' operation and there were certainly differences between local government support financially and physically. Therefore, the emergency services levy has given funding to all units whether they had good local government support or even local governments that did not have the finances to support a unit. For that part it has been great. Whether we should go directly to FESA or through local government has generated two schools of thought. One school of thought is, if there is a good relationship between the local unit and the local government, then we should maintain that because local government should be an integral part of emergency management for the area. My observations have been that some local governments would like to shirk that responsibility and have done so quite successfully in the past. From that point of view, I would prefer local government to be involved because of the wholeness of emergency response and there is a good relationship between units and local government. That could be broken down if we went holus-bolus the other way where FESA was to manage all the funds.

[11.05 am]

By having local government as an ally of the volunteers, if there is an issue, they can use local government as an ally to discuss issues with FESA. Some volunteers feel that dealing directly only with FESA might not give them enough strength to negotiate any issues. This is where I have been accused of a bit of fence-sitting, because I also support units that do not have that relationship with local government. As I said, some of them have shirked their responsibilities, from my perspective, and either they do not understand or they do not choose to understand the process, and they are not being helpful to the operation of the local unit. Local governments should realise that the State Emergency Service is an integral part of their responsibility for emergency management, as are the other emergency services. That is why I see that that relationship should stay. However, if that relationship has broken down and is irretrievable, as it is in some cases, then the opportunity should be available to deal directly with FESA because of its understanding of and relationship with the organisation. As I said, it is a bit of fence-sitting, but there are two schools of thought. I can really see the strengths in both of them. I guess at the end of the day I am not making it any easier for you guys to make a decision one way or another, but I am just throwing in those two schools of thought. I would prefer it if we went through local government, because that is where emergency management should be, working from that level upwards. However, there tends to be a tendency in the current generation of local governments to try to avoid being involved in emergency management.

Mrs J. HUGHES: On that subject, do you think that perhaps it might be a better role for FESA to impress on local government its responsibility to its emergency services rather than negate them altogether, as there is also an opportunity for local governments that do take on the responsibility to have added funding for the SES through a different funding stream as well as through the ESL?

Mr Petersen: I do not think it should be the responsibility of FESA to have to be the Big Brother to local government. It should be a partnership. On the second point, what you are suggesting is an incentive -

Mrs J. HUGHES: With emergency services being in contact with both FESA and local government through funding applications, there is an opportunity, of course, for the SES groups to get additional funding if the local governments take on their responsibility seriously.

Mr Petersen: Yes.

Mrs J. HUGHES: By bypassing local government, there is a prospect of perhaps losing some added funding opportunities.

Mr Petersen: Yes. One of the schools of thought is that that is where one of the strengths lies. Thanks very much for bringing that up.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Do you believe that SES units may be struggling with the reporting processes that they are required to undertake? Do you think that there is scope for training to be conducted for members, who are in essence volunteers, on the requirements of carrying out the administration of a particular unit?

Mr Petersen: One of the things about SES volunteers is that often they have turned up to help a community, using their natural strengths, whatever they are. A lot of SES people are trades-type people. Unfortunately, we do not attract a lot of management or executive-type people to the organisation. Whether that is because there is a perception about us or that those people are flat out running their businesses or whatever they are involved in, so that their volunteer opportunities are lessened, is a volunteering issue across many of the organisations. A lot of the people who turn up have, I guess, fixed jobs, and they have fixed hours, so they can help. However, a lot of them do not have the skills to look after the financials, or the interest in the financials is not there either. It is to help the community in a more practical sense. Yes, we would appreciate some training. There has been some minimal training on the ESL that I know of in the metro area about the timings to fit in. Some local governments come a week before and say, "Listen, you have a week to get the submission in for your ESL." I know that the metropolitan region has actually had a workshop with one lot of local managers, and it said, "These are the timings, so here is an opportunity for you guys to be more prepared and up front." However, that message needs to get out more. To that extent, I am running a State Emergency Service volunteers conference later in the year, and it may well be one of the topics that we are going to talk about to address that.

We would like to get a better relationship with local government and/or more input, depending on which way they go, from FESA staff, so that instead of just dropping into a unit for half an hour and saying, "Hi. Here I am," they are more involved. I know that some people see that as being Big Brother. However, a lot of the FESA staff, from my perception again, concentrate more on emergency management than on volunteer management. That is being overlooked, and that is where some of the things need to be addressed. Again, I know that in the metro area, for example, they have increased the positions by employing another district manager to try to do that. However, the staff themselves need to understand that. Some staff are good; others are resistant. We need to create better associations with either local government or the staff. A lot of the emergency services levy issues that have occurred in the past may well have never occurred had there been a closer relationship.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Just to summarise that, most people join the SES to be out there in the field saving people or helping people in times of need, but you still never get away from the fact that there is admin, submissions for funding, HR issues and asset management stuff that perhaps they are not equipped to do.

Mr Petersen: In this day and age, that is getting bigger and bigger and the responsibility is getting greater and greater.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Let us say that the government provided a TAFE course or something similar, with some units in organisational management, that could be offered to volunteers. Do you think that would be something that would be subscribed to?

Mr Petersen: The volunteers would appreciate the training. I guess one of the other problems is all the other training that is there as well. While I understand what you are trying to say, it becomes another burden to the volunteers. As you would appreciate, a lot of them spend a lot of their lives being SES volunteers, and some of them do not have much other life. Although that is needed and

although it is a good idea, it may be another burden to their ongoing training. Under the national competency scheme they must maintain their skills for a whole range of reasons, including to keep their skills to prevent litigation, and it would be another burden. Yes, I would appreciate the offer, but I guess what I am saying is that I appreciate the burden that it would also add.

Mrs J. HUGHES: I understand that time management for volunteers is always a very difficult thing, and we would rather have them on the ground than doing paperwork. Do you have a view on whether there should be a district officer from FESA who should follow up on the bureaucracy and have input from the people on the ground about what is required? Then the district officer would be the one who undertook the necessary paperwork to be submitted.

Mr Petersen: I would support a stance of that nature. I have raised it with FESA before, particularly with the national competency-based training. In the past SES has had its own training structure. It has volunteers who are skilled as instructors. However, under the national competency-based system, there is a pile of paperwork that goes with it. I see the training being done, but I see the whole process being bogged down in the paper trail. I have suggested to FESA in the past, just on that topic alone, that it should have a support officer to be more involved in making sure the paper process concludes, so that the people who have training skills are also recognised for their training skills. That is where that process will break down. I know that personally it happens with me, so I see that other people with whom I have discussed it would have the same issues.

[11.15 am]

That is likewise with all the other tasks such as HR and all the other paperwork that comes through. FESA, as an organisation, has a responsibility to pass on information, but it has not got any less. The assistance of a staff person would be greatly appreciated.

The CHAIRMAN: I want to ask you something about recruitment and how you are coping with recruitment, particularly in country areas. Do you have any strategies in place to try to enhance recruitment?

Mr Petersen: Nationally, volunteers are reducing to all organisations. Country volunteers per capita are higher than in the metropolitan area. Those are pretty much standard statistics. I know that FESA in its youth and volunteer services branch is trying to develop packages to assist units with that. There are some underlying things that need to change. I guess one of the things is employer perception about their volunteers. Some employers see the volunteers as a risk to their business. You can appreciate that, if there is a really small business, a volunteer may have to rush off to do a job. It has been based on an understanding between employers and volunteers. We need to raise the profile of volunteers so that they are an important part of the community and can be a valuable asset to the business as well - as long as that balance is struck. We need to promote that more. That is something I have raised with FESA. If we could raise that community profile for all the volunteers, people may say, "Phil, you are an SES volunteer. How do you become one? It is great. I would like to employ you because you have team-orientated skills and specific other skills." We should strike a balance. We need government support. If a person has to leave employment for a couple of days, temporary employees should be able to be hired in so that the company can get a tax break for that assistance. Whether that is a state or a federal issue, I am not sure. That could be an incentive to overcome the financial losses to particularly small employers, which is where a lot of the issues arise. It happens even with larger employers. The employer I am with, you can see their attitude has changed over the years as they become more commercially orientated. The pressure is on volunteers more and more.

There are a couple of ways. Yes, there is a need. One of the ways is to raise the profile in the community for the volunteers. Another example is that when I was at Karratha as a volunteer, we had no headquarters. There was no image to the global community. When the local headquarters was built back in the 1980s, we got a far greater increase because people could see that there was an

organisation that existed rather than being hidden behind doors and having no shopfront, if you can call it that. That is another part of it - the perception and how it appears in the local community. Is it an old shed that the white ants have conquered some time ago? There are a couple of spots around the place that have been like that. It is about perceptions. We need to change the perceptions and the shopfront image to the community.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the association offer any level of training or counselling, particularly if the volunteers turn out to a fatality or a particularly bad incident?

Mr Petersen: The association does not, per se. Through its structure, and even before FESA was formed, there was a peer support group in the State Emergency Service that provided that service. That was formed some years ago by volunteers who recognised the need even before the organisation recognised it. It was the volunteers who pushed that to where it is today. There is that peer support for critical incidents and stress. In one of my training courses for rescue it is one of the topics we talk about so that people know about it. The information is put out there for the volunteers. That is there. In terms of what the association offers, we have what we call in the association a scholarship. If volunteers find a TAFE course or something like that that would assist them, and it is not within the SES training scheme - it might be accountancy or small business management or something like that - and they feel that it would help them, they can approach us to get financial assistance to make that happen.

Mr M.J. COWPER: You spoke about the marketing and the shopfront aspect of the SES. The SES has been something of a journey organisation as it was under the police at one stage and it is now, as we know, under FESA. Is the headquarters of the SES still at Belmont? Does it have a home in WA?

Mr Petersen: In the past the state headquarters was at Belmont. Belmont is now the metropolitan regional headquarters but also part of the same building is shared with Fire and other FESA resources. I guess that the headquarters of the organisation is FESA House at 480 Hay Street. That is the location of the executive staff. Under the current staff restructure that has changed. There has been a change of alignment of the SES in the past two months. Staff in the FESA organisation, right up to executive director level, could be seen to be aligned with the State Emergency Service or Fire. There has been a staff restructure. In the management of FESA now they just become FESA managers. People who might have had a past in Fire or SES may become district managers or regional managers or area managers to support local units. The idea being is that only one FESA person is knocking on the door of local government; they are not seeing two or three different representatives with different goals. They see just one person. In terms of where the headquarters are, there are regional offices. However, in terms of a state office, FESA House is it.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Is there a concern that the SES may be losing its identity?

Mr Petersen: Yes, there is. The volunteers' concern for the loss of identity has been inherent for a number of years. It is still thought of in some circles. It was thought that the forming of FESA would lead to the loss of the identity of SES volunteers. That has never occurred. In my dealings with FESA and the past SES executive, it has never been my observation that there was a surreptitious plan to get rid of the SES as an organisation. Under FESA, media and the way the organisation marketed itself led to the loss of the identity of the SES volunteers - it was because of the spin.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Like poor cousins, in other words.

Mr Petersen: A lot of units felt they were the poor cousins compared with the financials that went to other divisions. Certainly, those are some of the things that the association has been pursuing to resolve. Even with the emergency services levy there are some concerns that there may not be a fair dishing out of the funds. I do not have any evidence about that because I have not researched it that much. There is certainly that feeling.

The CHAIRMAN: I will follow on from the identity “crisis”. FESA is now promoting emergency services units, which are SES volunteer rescue services and bushfire brigades. They are relatively new. How are your members coping with the transition? Are there benefits or bad things about it?

Mr Petersen: I understand the reason that the FESA units are now called volunteer and emergency service units. I understand why FESA formed them, particularly in small communities that do not have the strength in the community itself to form separate identifiable units of strength to address local emergency issues. I can appreciate why they formed these units. I tell the story that if there were an SES issue, the volunteers would run to the left side of the shed and jump in their orange overalls. If there were a fire, they would run to the right side of the shed and jump into yellow overalls. It is often the same people in those organisations - St John Ambulance and other organisations. I can see the advantage of units forming together and identifying local emergency issues and targeting those rather than having the full gamut of skills for every service. I guess I have a concern that they tend to have a stronger bias towards Fire than SES skills. That has become apparent in some responses. There is a unit that has quite a large number of volunteers but when they were called to provide manpower for research, out of a unit of 35 none was available. I am not even sure whether they were skilled to address that issue. Had there been a fire, it would have been a different situation.

The CHAIRMAN: Is there any cross-training between the different emergency services organisations? Does there need to be more of it?

Mr Petersen: There is cross-training in terms of emergency management; when there are situations we operate under the same system of management for incidents. It would be the ICS or AIIMS system. Under the new staff restructure, that is where the staff are being cross-trained so that they can manage Fire and SES. I know that is causing a ruckus with staff. There is resistance to changes to the old mould. It is the association’s issue if service by the volunteers falls by the wayside. Every now and again I pick up on issues and address them with FESA.

I understand the purpose of volunteer emergency service units for small communities addressing local issues. I do not support - and neither did the past CEO - the schools of thought in certain areas about joining quite strong SES and quite strong bushfire services and putting them together under the one organisation. That will result in addressing only one range of skills and losing other skills. If SES volunteers wanted to have red lights and sirens and play with fire, they would have joined the fireies - or they do anyway. Some SES people do not feel comfortable in the Fire area just as some Fire people do not feel comfortable in the SES. That leaves a choice in the community for where people have their strengths.

The CHAIRMAN: In at least some instances local government is insuring equipment, and so is FESA, which results in problems including double excess payments. Can you comment on that? Do you have any view on that?

Mr Petersen: In terms of insurance of property, if that is occurring, it is something that local government and FESA need to sit down and have a serious think about and resolve. If some local governments insure, they will self-insure to a certain amount. If that is an identifiable issue, it needs to be resolved between local government and FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: I give you this opportunity to make some closing comments. Is there something that you have not addressed or you feel we have not addressed?

[11:28 am]

Mr Petersen: I think I have covered most of the points I wanted to make on the matter of who manages the emergency services levy, since I have been accused of sitting on the fence. I guess that at the end of the day, it will be the evidence that the committee collects that matters. It is not only my view, but the views of volunteers who have spoken to me. All I can do is to relate that to you. The other major thing is that it is important for the volunteers to have input into the organisation so

that whatever structure it falls under, there is an opportunity for volunteers to perform at the highest possible level. We should not lose sight of the fact that under the Fire and Emergency Services umbrella, we have had some pretty positive wins as well. The emergency services levy was one of those; another was the two significant pieces of legislation that Michelle Roberts pushed through Parliament and which actually legitimised the State Emergency Service. In the past the association has relied on a journal as a source for our own funding. Now FESA supports us to a small degree, which has taken some of those hardships out of our operation, and we are actually working with FESA to find some administrative support, because I am working in a volunteer role. I still have to turn up at work, which impinges upon my employment a hell of a lot, so we are trying to improve the service that the volunteer association is providing to the volunteers. It is important that their message gets through to the community and to FESA. That is the purpose of the association - it is an advocacy organisation.

There have been some good outcomes under the FESA umbrella, and I guess that even though there will be a change of executive director, I still see a positive future for that arrangement.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your contribution to the committee of inquiry. A transcript of the hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of typographical errors or errors of transcription or fact. New material cannot be introduced and the sense of the evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, you should submit a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration. If the transcript is not returned within 10 days of your receiving it, it will be deemed to be correct.

Again, Phil, thank you very much for coming in and sharing your views with us. I know we will get a good report out of this and have some good recommendations for not only FESA but also the volunteers.

Hearing concluded at 11.31 pm
