

FORMER GERALDTON FIRE STATION SITE

Grievance

MR I.C. BLAYNEY (Geraldton) [10.48 am]: I rise to grieve to the Minister for Emergency Services about the former Geraldton fire station site, located on the corner of Durlacher Street and Anzac Terrace. I thank the minister for taking my grievance.

The ACTING SPEAKER: Member, can you speak up a bit, please?

Mr I.C. BLAYNEY: The site operated as a fire station for volunteer and permanent brigades between 1969 and 2016. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services vacated the site in 2016 following the opening of the new Geraldton country fire and rescue service facility on North West Coastal Highway. The intention was that the site would then be managed by the City of Greater Geraldton, vested to the city by the Minister for Lands, for the purpose of a community workshop for the Menshed Geraldton Incorporated in 2017. It was also considered for a bus depot, a police car depot and offices for the Mid West Chamber of Commerce and Industry, but at present there is no use for it on the horizon. A fair bit of correspondence between the City of Greater Geraldton and several ministerial offices suggested that either a management order could be issued to the city or the land could be transferred to the city in freehold. The option of a freehold transfer was initially put forward when the city agreed to allow an excision of a portion of its former depot site on North West Coastal Highway to permit the Department of Fire and Emergency Services to build the new Geraldton fire station. The swap did not occur at that time due to a number of uncertainties around the former site in both tenure and contamination terms. However, despite intentions from the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage to create a reserve over the land in support of the Geraldton Men's Shed in 2018 once the land had been transferred from DFES, DFES still has control of the site and has since advised that all property owned, leased or managed on behalf of the state must be used for the purposes of emergency services. It therefore seems that DFES is now prevented from granting the City of Greater Geraldton access to the old fire station because the city's intention was to use it for purposes other than emergency services. In the intervening period, the Geraldton Men's Shed was offered the Ngala community service building on the corner of Augustus and Gregory Streets, so it formally withdrew its interest to relocate to the former fire station site. The decision of the department to retain the former fire station is surprising given that at the end of last year, the minister indicated that any offers for the site would be considered. In response to the minister's direction, the city arranged for a valuation of the property and subsequently made an offer, asking the state to relinquish the site to the city in freehold for one dollar. At the same time, the city proposed that the former fire station be turned into a car park, a decision that was endorsed by all City of Greater Geraldton councillors last year.

The site is disused, falling into disrepair and home to some homeless people. The current building in its boarded-up condition is a blight on the Durlacher Street streetscape, and given the prominent location of this site in the CBD, allowing this building to deteriorate may result in vandalism and public criticism towards the city. Utilising this land as a public car park will assist in further activating the civic centre as part of the overall Geraldton city centre revitalisation project, and in future public parking provision when lot 601 Marine Terrace is developed. Locals are already using the front of the site for free car parking while they shop across the road. It could be argued that establishing a proper car park would enable smaller parking spaces in the CBD to be utilised for more appropriate purposes. A couple of years ago the city worked with Western Power to have unsightly overhead powerlines relocated underground through this area in Durlacher Street. The footpaths in this area have also been upgraded to improve the streetscape. In addition, earlier this year the council approved the relocation of the Geraldton Visitor Centre to the Geraldton Regional Art Gallery on Chapman Road. This site will also provide much-needed parking for visitors to Geraldton, keeping them in the region longer and, in turn, supporting local businesses. This is vital given the current state of the economy. The fire station, in its current condition and presentation, works against what the city is trying to achieve. It is important that the use of the site complements the city's revitalisation initiatives.

The council estimates that to demolish the buildings onsite and then construct a car park to minimum standards with a limited clean-up of contaminants would cost around \$400 000. I understand that the city has asked the state government to contribute 50 per cent of the project costs and I ask that this suggestion is considered further. It is important to note that the city provided the land on North West Coastal Highway so that DFES could re-establish its operations to its current position, and the city has since incurred costs arranging for a valuation of the property based on the minister's previous direction for offers to be made to purchase the land. I also ask that the City of Greater Geraldton's offer to buy the former fire station site be reconsidered and I ask for an explanation about why the department has decided to retain this site after having determined that it was appropriate to leave it. The actions of the department are inconsistent and require an explanation. The city and I would also like further clarity on when DFES will take action to clean up the building, given that the site is considered a low priority. It would be totally unacceptable for the site to be derelict for 10 years, as previously indicated by the department. I thank the minister for taking my grievance.

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn — Minister for Emergency Services) [10.54 am]: I thank the member for raising this issue. This matter has been raised with me on many occasions, sometimes with a greater deal of passion, by Legislative Council members Hon Laurie Graham and Hon Darren West. The member for Geraldton has also raised it with me by way of a letter on a number of occasions. I, too, would like to see the former Geraldton fire station site become functional within the Geraldton community. By way of background, member, the Geraldton fire station was decommissioned from lease in 2015. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services has since spent several years trying to facilitate the future of that site. The critical point to note is what I have said to both the member and the City of Greater Geraldton in my letters of response to them: any transfer of this land tenure would ultimately need approval from the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage because the land is not under the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' control. The land actually belongs to DPLH. DFES holds the Durlacher Street site under a crown grant in trust.

It does not have the authority to sell the land. I have actually put that in a letter to the member and also the city. We cannot simply sell the land because the land title does not belong to us; it belongs to DPLH. The former fire station is also classified as "possibly contaminated: investigation required". Under the Contaminated Sites Act 2003—an act under the auspices of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation—the legacy is the potential PFAS in the soil from firefighting foams. That has obviously been a complicating factor in the disposal of the land. Nothing in the Contaminated Sites Act 2003 prevents the transfer of the crown grant in trust for the site. However, a detailed site investigation is required to evaluate any contamination before the site can be transferred, irrespective of its use, including sealing the site for the purposes of a car park, as the member highlighted.

A working group was recently set up comprising representatives from the relevant parties—the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, DWER, DPLH and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet—to consider a way forward. The working group met on 11 August 2020 and was advised by DPC and DPLH that the site will not be transferred from DFES until the state understands the extent of PFAS contamination prior to progressing the site's transfer. To ensure the best use of emergency services levy funds, the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner has decided to explore options to retain and repurpose the former Geraldton fire station site to enhance community safety and emergency management capability in the region. These options are being considered currently, as well as options for sealing the site with hardstand.

The predicament we find ourselves in, member, is that the land is held as a crown grant in trust by DFES for DPLH. In order to shift the title of the land, DWER is saying that any movement in the shift of that title would require an examination of the soil and its remediation, which is very expensive. On that basis, the commissioner, in order to progress this and move it forward, is saying, "Let's just leave this land in our hands as the existing site is established." The commissioner and the department will look at the cost of demolishing the building and having it taken away and putting in place a hardstand. What that hardstand and that land will be used for afterwards will probably be for discussion between the Department of Fire and Emergency Services and the City of Greater Geraldton. It will not officially be a car park, because as soon as the use of that site is altered for any purpose other than a fire station, it will be necessary to do the examination and remediation of the site. Whether the site will then be sealed and people happen to park on it is another matter.

It is not as though the department is not trying to find a way through the very costly process of dealing with this site.

Mr P.J. Rundle: What about the \$400 million emergency services levy?

Mr F.M. LOGAN: Member, we would prefer to use that money for emergency services, not for knocking down buildings; that is what it is there for. The member, of all people, should know better than to raise that issue. The emergency services levy is all about delivering emergency services to look after the member's constituents and other people in the bush. It is not for knocking down buildings and beautifying streetscapes. Nevertheless, this is still a responsibility that falls to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation. It is about trying to improve the streetscape of Geraldton by getting rid of a dilapidated and dangerous building that is currently an eyesore.

As I have said, member, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services is doing the best it can to deliver what the city wants, what the member wants and what the people want, and we are working our way towards that.