

*Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs — Sixteenth Report —  
“Municipal Waste Management in Western Australia”*

Resumed from 19 May 2009.

*Motion*

**Hon KATE DOUST:** I move —

That the report be noted.

The sixteenth report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs was tabled in May 2009, and the opportunity to speak to this report has had a long gestation. During that time we have also dealt with a number of other issues and legislation related to this inquiry.

Firstly, I thank all the staff involved with this report. In particular, I thank one of the research staff, Dr Vincent Cusack, who is no longer with us. Vincent did a fabulous job assisting the committee in getting this report together prior to his leaving. I also acknowledge the members of the committee, some of whom are also no longer with us. Hon Wendy Duncan is still with us. She came onto the committee halfway through this inquiry and she certainly got her feet into quite a bit of rubbish towards the end of the inquiry. I acknowledge the work done by Hon Sheila Mills, Hon Bruce Donaldson and Hon Paul Llewellyn, and also Hon Robyn McSweeney, who was on the committee at the start of the inquiry; she missed out on traipsing through rubbish sites.

This report originally arose as a result of a petition given to the committee—from memory, the petition was tabled by Hon Simon O’Brien—relating to specific problems that constituents in the South Metropolitan Region were experiencing from the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council waste facility. The committee initially held inquiries based on that petition and heard from a number of people in the area who had grievances about the level of odours and emissions from that facility. To this day, that is an ongoing issue in the South Metropolitan Region. A number of organisations are working to try to resolve that matter. At the time of the tabling of this report, those matters had not been resolved to the point where local people were satisfied. Unfortunately, since the tabling of this report, part of that facility has burnt down. There are now issues about whether it will be rebuilt, in what form, and where it will go from now.

The inquiry lapsed when Parliament was prorogued in 2008 and the petition fell aside. The Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs was interested in looking at the issue of waste management in this state prior to the petition being tabled. I am sure Hon Robyn McSweeney will recall that. The committee decided that it would conduct its own inquiry and link it back to the work that we had already done on the original petition, but broaden the scope of the inquiry. This report was used extensively during our debate on the waste levy legislation late last year. It has been quite a useful document not just during that debate but also as a guide to the government on the way forward, because it canvasses a range of issues.

I do not know whether members have copies of the report. I have touched on the background that started this inquiry. Once the committee delved into this issue it became apparent that this is a major emerging industry in Western Australia. It is an issue that has captured the imagination of all local governments throughout the state in terms of how they deal with waste in their own areas. Some councils are dealing with it well and others are still trying to come to terms with how to manage it, not just organic waste but also inorganic waste, construction waste and computer waste and all the other types of issues that, 20 or 30 years ago, people did not have to deal with.

We are trying to take a holistic approach to how we deal with waste management not just in the metropolitan area but throughout the state. We looked at the role of local government and we looked at the role of the regional councils that have been established. We have seen a number of regional councils developed in the past few years. I know in the metropolitan area we have the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council and the Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council and, in the north, we have the Mindarie Regional Council. There are quite a number of them. Primarily their focus appears to be on waste management. Regional councils are made up of a number of members from the councils within their area. It is quite a structured organisation. Representatives from the Western Australian Local Government Association appeared before the committee. A range of local governments also presented submissions, both written and verbal. We had representatives from regional councils and the Forum of Regional Councils appear before us. Of interest to members of the committee was what we saw as empire building in waste management. It was quite interesting, as we worked our way through the issues, to find out who it was felt was responsible for service delivery. If members go through the report they will see there is quite a bit of commentary during the various submissions that we received about those types of issues.

I will not go into great detail about the landfill levy or the Waste Authority. We canvassed those issues substantially when we dealt with the legislation last year. I am sure that others will probably talk about that. I will cover some issues that caused real concerns. Again, this comes back to the originating petition that kicked this off—the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council issue. It was quite interesting to see that the initial

problem was being dealt with. When the CEO and the chair appeared before the committee to give evidence about the SMRC and its problems, and their relationship to the community, it was fairly evident that one of the key problems—I personally am still of this view and I know that other members were of this view—came down to how they communicated with members of the community not just about the issue but about how they were going to deal with it. There has been a real failure on the part of the SMRC to manage that effectively. I see the Minister for Environment nodding, so she obviously agrees with what I am saying. There was so much antagonism from the community about this issue that they would not engage with the officers of the SMRC and would not directly raise issues with them; and, to this day, will not do so. There is a lack of trust in the SMRC from the community. Since this inquiry, I have spoken a number of times to the new chair and the previous chair, and the CEO, Stuart McCall, about what they can do to improve relationships between themselves and the community so that the community, when there are odour emission issues from time to time, will take those matters up directly with that organisation so that it can take direct action to resolve it.

We were provided with examples that led to the breakdown in the relationship. One example was the manner in which the SMRC responded to complaints, the tardiness in response time and the approach it took to individuals in the community—in fact the SMRC was accused of passing them off as whingers or militant complainers. They pegged them off in certain parts by saying, “It is only these people in this area”, but when we looked at the map and saw where the individual complaints came from, it was quite a scattergun approach. There was no rhyme or reason as to why different individuals would have a complaint. In my view people do not make these sorts of complaints just because they have nothing else to do; they make them because it is interfering with their lives and they have a legitimate gripe about not being able to enjoy the full facility of their homes. Some people complained they could not even leave their homes on certain days because of the impact of the odour arising from that site.

I was quite perturbed about something that occurred during this inquiry. Early one evening members of the SMRC decided to go on a tour. They took some members of the SMRC council with them, and some of the staff. It was a tour to show them where the hot spot areas were where people had made complaints. In this wonderful age in which people like to post videos on YouTube, somebody decided to post a video on YouTube of the people in the area who complained. Hon Robyn McSweeney will remember this. Various councillors were being shown the homes of the people who had made complaints and commentary was made about those individuals. When this video was made public on YouTube—once it is on the net it is out there for everyone to see—the people who lived in the community who had been targeted in that video were highly offended, as they should have been. At page 31 of the report, members will see that the committee raised this matter. I am not too sure whether Hon Robyn McSweeney or Hon Wendy Duncan was on the committee at that point. Hon Wendy Duncan might have been with us by then. We raised the fact that this video had been made public primarily to humiliate and embarrass the people who lived in the community for making a complaint. It was a very interesting form of bullying. Although the person who made the video has since realised that he made a fundamental error in judgement and was highly embarrassed, the fact is that it was done and it was out there. It exacerbated the problems that were already pretty bad in the relationship between that community and that facility. I really do not know how they will dig themselves out of that hole and build up the relationship again. But there are still questions that need to be resolved about the way forward for the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council. I note that a number of members for the South Metropolitan Region—I am sure that Hon Simon O’Brien has also received a number of complaints over the years about the issues relating to SMRC —

**Hon Simon O’Brien:** It has been an ongoing issue, yes.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** It is an ongoing issue, and we still receive emails from time to time about the level of odour emission from that site. That, I think, is still a work in progress. That is some of the background to the issue. In regard to that petition, the committee acknowledged in the report that the community complaints were indeed valid and should be addressed appropriately, and that the odour had had a substantial impact on the lives of the people living there.

The next thing that members will find in chapter 2 of the report is a section on page 35 relating to Canning council and its decision to remove itself from involvement in the SMRC. This occurred during the inquiry. The SMRC is built on Canning council property. I understand that there had been a long lease period to the SMRC from the council. The council was, and still is at this time, one of the participating member councils in the SMRC, as is Melville and, I think, Cockburn. About seven councils in the South Metropolitan Region participate. However, Canning has taken a very hard line. Based upon the issues raised by the community and what Canning council perceives as the lack of action to remedy those issues to the satisfaction of the community, Canning council has decided to withdraw its involvement. Although it made the decision last year, I do not think it comes into effect until later this year or next year. Given that this report was tabled last year, I think it is probably May or June, or something like that, this year that it takes effect. That was a very interesting decision. I

am not too sure where Canning is regarding how it will manage its waste when it will no longer be accessing that facility. However, I thought that was a very interesting move.

There have been a range of issues for those local councils concerning how they now deal with the SMRC. A lot of ratepayers have complained about their increasing costs from levies imposed on them by the councils. As the councils made a substantial commitment to building that facility—I think something like \$90 million went into building the original complex—there is, I think, as members would understand, a reluctance to just walk away from it. However, if they now have to consider rebuilding the facility, one would hope that they would look at best practice and build the latest and the best, if one likes, waste management facility. I might talk about some of those options in the report a bit later, because when the committee had an opportunity to travel last January, we had a look at quite a wide range of different types of waste facilities. As I think I have said before, when I came to this place, I never thought that I would get to traipse around so many rubbish tips and sewerage works in my life, but I am becoming quite good at it; and there is a pair of very lovely black shoes that were dumped in a hotel room in Sydney because there was no way in the world that I could possibly bring them back to Perth after they had been through about seven different rubbish places.

**Hon Robyn McSweeney:** That's because Hon Bruce Donaldson likes to travel.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** He did like to travel. I did not see him dumping his shoes in the bin, though. I must say—I will give him credit—that he was very, very passionate about this issue and very keen for us to complete this inquiry before he left Parliament.

I will just come back and go through some of the other issues. There is the issue with Canning council. It will be interesting to see over time how other councils manage that matter. At the very end of last year, I think Mindarie Regional Council opened a new facility, and I think another regional council is currently building —

**Hon Sally Talbot:** The EMRC is —

**Hon KATE DOUST:** The Eastern Metropolitan Regional Council is currently building a new type of facility also.

**Hon Sally Talbot:** There is a long process going on.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** Absolutely. I will take members to chapter 8 of the report, and I will talk about some of those places that the committee went to. It was quite interesting to see how some of those different types of facilities operated. Given the problems that had occurred with the SMRC, with its placement within a community and its spread of odour emissions, it was quite interesting to see where some of the variety of sites that we visited were placed.

The first place that we went to was in Cairns. This facility is older than the one in Canning Vale, but it is a fairly similar structure. Hon Wendy Duncan will agree with me that as one walks through the facility, it is a real experience for the olfactory sense. It is a real shocker, is it not? It is a smell that a person never wants to smell again, but, unfortunately, we did. As we walked through the process, we understood why people were fully kitted out with face gear, and why everything is watertight because of the odours. As the product worked its way through the system and ended up in the clearing houses, the type of medium they used was quite effective in reducing the odours. This facility was located slightly outside town. I remember that the day we visited was a very cloudy day, and it was quite windy. We asked questions about how the odours came back in. However, what struck me with the Cairns Regional Council and the facility management was that they had a good plan in place for how they worked with their community. I think, from memory—I must look to see whether we recorded it—they said that they had quite a low incident rate or complaint rate. That was quite interesting.

One thing about that facility that we noted was that it dealt only with domestic waste; it did not touch any commercial waste at all. When we think about Cairns, its primary industry is tourism, and it has a large number of hotels. However, the waste from those hotels is not touched at all. Therefore, I assume that that waste still goes to the dump. This was purely about residential waste. The best thing about the process that was in place for collection and removal—this is one of the differences between the process at the Cairns facility and the process at the SMRC that stood out to us—was that the Cairns facility was able to use a by-product from the waste effectively; it was sold back to the community. The council used the waste product for mulch on the roadsides. The sugar cane farmers were perhaps the largest purchasers of the mulch for the farms. We asked about the issue of glass, and we were told that although there were still some minor fragments, it was not such a great issue, because the product was going on the sugar cane. However, the Cairns facility was able to get a return for its product, and we thought that was quite interesting, because the SMRC has not been able to get that type of return to date, I do not think.

We then moved on to Port Stephens, which is a rural area. We met with the chief executive officer of the Port Stephens site and the mayor. As it turned out, the mayor was probably the biggest purchaser of the mulch for his

own agricultural property. Obviously, he was a very strong advocate for the site. Again, this site was a similar set-up to that at the SMRC. It is a Bedminster composting facility. It is probably a couple of years older than what we have. It is in an isolated area currently, but there are plans to have residential housing built alongside it. We were quite interested in how people at this site had managed their engagement with not just the developers, but also the community in the area. Again, Port Stephens Council had a very good plan and a community engagement program in place. I think the number of complaints was also fewer than 10 a year, which is a very good thing; but, again, that was a different arrangement.

The committee had an opportunity to look at a couple of other sites in New South Wales. We looked at Penrith City Council's facility at Macarthur Resource Recovery Park, which is an anaerobic facility. I am just trying to recall whether that was the fairly new one. I think it is run by the government, but I am not too sure. We also looked at the Eastern Creek landfill site, which was still under construction when we went through and was due to open a couple of months later. That, again, was a different type of facility being set up. We looked at the Elizabeth Drive facility, which was an old waste facility that was coming to the end of its life. The staff at that facility showed us how they were able to use their waste and convert it into energy. Although the site may shut down in the next couple of years, they said they had enough waste to continue to convert into energy for 20 or 30 years, from memory; it was for a lengthy period. It was therefore quite interesting to see how these different types of facilities were set up and how they separated product. I was particularly interested in Macarthur Resource Recovery Park, which was an extremely large centre and very clean with a massive organic section.

We also noted the difference between the various councils regarding the number of times they collected bins each week. Another issue raised with these councils was the types of bins they used. Some had a one-bin system and others had a system of anything up to three bins. One council—I think Penrith City Council—employed a fellow to ensure that bins were either collected or were placed in the right position. The way the council managed its waste was a fairly substantial commitment from the council.

I refer members to page 121, chapter 9 at the end of the report. As we were in a bit of a race to get this report tabled before certain members left the committee, we regarded it as an interim report or a bit of a kick-start report; it is not the be-all and end-all of how waste management could be dealt with in this state. However, the committee hopes that at some later stage it might revisit this issue or there might be another petition on the issue so that the committee can go into more detail on the subject. Therefore, the committee did not have time to go into a number of issues in any great level of detail. Those issues were around the topics of commercial, industrial and demolition waste. Chapter 9 of the report outlines some feedback from GRD Minproc and information on how it deals with those issues. One point raised was that sometimes the by-product from waste can be used, for example, for road base. However, there is sometimes reluctance by local councils to purchase that product to use as road base. We therefore talked about how these products could be marketed better so that they could be picked up and used by these organisations, rather than just making the product and setting it to one side.

We also looked at waste management plans for developments. I will just refer to some of the headings in the report, as these are perhaps issues that could be looked at separately or could be looked at in another way in a broader inquiry. On page 122 is the heading "Landfill Allocation Trading", an issue on which former member Hon Paul Llewellyn was very keen. On page 124 is the heading "Three Bin Collection". Some councils, such as the City of Stirling, still have one bin for collection, and my own local council, the Town of Victoria Park, now has two bins but previously had a bin and two containers. I think a lot of councils are now seriously making an investment, not only in the number of bins but also in the way they collect and disperse waste. I therefore think that is a real issue for government, as dealing with that issue is a major expense to local governments.

**Hon Sally Talbot:** Bayswater now has three.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** Does Bayswater have three?

**Hon Sally Talbot:** Right.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** Councils are now looking at how they deal with batteries, light fittings and all those sorts of products. Separation of batteries and light fittings is a very difficult issue for waste facilities, because a lot of those sorts of products either do not break down or are very difficult to break down.

I am sure Hon Wendy Duncan will be very keen to talk about what happens in the regions. Although we did a bit of work on that, we did not do as much work as we would like to have done on how regional councils deal with the issue of waste, as the original inquiry was fairly city-centric. However, it is an issue that regional councils will have to deal with because waste is often just taken out to a tip and everything just goes into landfill. At some point regional councils will have to decide how they will deal with the tyranny of distance issue in terms of the collection of waste, how they dispose of it and what they do with any by-product.

As a starting point on what currently happens with waste management in this state and comparing such systems in Queensland and New South Wales, New South Wales seemed to be fairly progressive in this area and had a range of options for waste management.

The committee did not get to travel overseas. I know that former member Hon Bruce Donaldson was mortified that he missed an opportunity. I know that he would have loved to visit Germany to look at the Bedminster system in, I think, Munich or Berlin.

**Hon Simon O'Brien:** I think you could go to SMRC and see the Bedminster; that's the trouble.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** I know, and that is what we said to him, too! We also said, "Have a look online." But he was keen, and he would also have liked to see the GRD facility, I think, in Lancashire, England. GRD actually was very helpful in providing information to the committee about how some of those emission problems could have been dealt with at the South Metropolitan Regional Council. It is a shame in some ways that the information from companies that have had to work their way through the process cannot be shared or picked up in some way. Perhaps that is something that the regional councils or the Forum of Regional Councils could use to help share that type of information as they grow and develop.

I would be very interested at a later stage to further look at the role of local government, the regional councils and FORC. There seems to be a mushrooming—if members like—of engagement and perhaps a bit of doubling up of engagement.

Other issues raised but not really canvassed by the committee—they have been raised by members of Parliament and by members of local government—are transparency and accountability of those types of organisations. That was certainly an issue that was canvassed by the City of Canning when it made a decision to withdraw from the SMRC. Therefore a raft of matters were covered by the committee but perhaps not in as much detail as we would have liked. If we had had a longer period for the inquiry, we may have been able to pool more information. We did not want this to become a self-referral inquiry to the extent of the Alcoa inquiry a few years ago, but this is a matter that people in the community are becoming more engaged with. People are becoming better educated about how they manage their domestic waste. Even children in schools are being taught how to deal with these issues better. I think that is great. I am always being told by my kids that I should be recycling things better and where I should put things.

**Hon Donna Faragher:** The three Rs—they get taught the three Rs.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** What are the three Rs?

**Hon Donna Faragher:** They are reduce, recycle and recover.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** In my class it was religion, writing and arithmetic.

**Hon Robyn McSweeney:** Times have changed.

**Hon KATE DOUST:** It is a good thing, because unless children start at that point, they will not understand. For a lot of us, it has taken a bit of retraining and a bit of rethinking about how we manage these things. That issue came up in New South Wales, as we talked about how to educate people. The New South Wales councils showed us a number of the documents that they were using.

*Sitting suspended from 1.00 to 2.00 pm*

**Hon KATE DOUST:** Before we broke for lunch, I was starting to talk about one of the issues that has been identified in New South Wales with the collection of bins; I think it was the Macarthur Recycling Facility. I was talking about how it is trying to re-educate people in managing their waste. I am not too sure how it can be managed as I think it is very difficult to re-educate people about certain issues. There was quite a lot of public housing in that part of Sydney and people in those areas were either reluctant to recycle or not too sure how to manage their recycling. Local government had some issues with the collection of bins. Quite often it took a lot more effort to get the message through to those areas, and it also increased costs in that area.

Although I think changes are needed over the long term and local governments and regional councils need to be creative in the way they engage and educate the community to manage domestic waste, over a longer period of time not only do we in the metropolitan region but also certainly those in the rural areas need to start thinking about how we deal with this issue. In its response to our committee report, the government indicated that it received most of the recommendations favourably or is taking action on a number of those recommendations anyway.

As I said earlier, the individual members of the committee that produced this report always felt that this was just an initial inquiry because of the shortened time we had available. It is really to give people a bit of—I was going to say a "taste" or "flavour", but they are probably not words to use in reference to waste!—an indicative report. It canvasses not only what the issues are, but also the diversity of waste management solution options available.

The report looks at what is currently operating in the eastern states and touches upon some of the examples in Europe, and, as I said, Hon Bruce Donaldson was disappointed. I have talked about what is happening in Berlin, but there are a number of examples of Bedminster systems operating in highly populated areas without emissions problems. That might be something that is worth looking into at a later stage, because these types of facilities will eventually become crowded by residential homes and industry.

There is a broad range of issues involved that I will not talk about today, although I do not know whether I will have another opportunity to do so if this debate continues any longer. Some of the evidence provided to the committee by the then chair of the Waste Authority, Mr Barry Carbon, was excellent and he was very upfront and blunt with the committee about where he thought things were going at the time. There is a lot of work to do, and I think it is very important for the state government to engage with this issue and bring in all the various players. At a later stage it will be interesting to have a look at the structures that are evolving for the management of this issue, the use of ratepayers' money in this area, and the accountability and transparency of the organisations that manage waste in Western Australia.

I encourage members to have a look at this report; it is a good starting point. The committee has worked very hard, and I certainly acknowledge the members who are no longer with us in this place who were very keen to get this report into the chamber. I also acknowledge the staff involved, because they have been a great support to the committee in completing this report and getting it tabled. I am sure that other members are very keen on this issue and would like to share their views and thoughts. I encourage members to read this report and I look forward to hearing what other members have to say about it.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** I am very pleased to speak in support of the noting of this report, which, as Hon Kate Doust has said, has been a very influential report since it was tabled in this house last May, just under a year ago. I know that there is only a short time remaining to me today to speak on this report, but I look forward to continuing my remarks at a future date. I will make the point now that one of the issues of some considerable discussion between the Leader of the House, the Leader of the Opposition and the leaders of other parties relating to new sessional orders in this place is that we might get to consider committee reports in a more timely fashion. Although we could have had a robust discussion last May about the findings in this report, this is one of the reports on the quite long list of committee reports for consideration for which there is some merit in reminding honourable members of their existence and of some of their substantive recommendations and findings.

The management of waste in this state has been very much the topic of the moment for some months. Before we rose for the Christmas break, I had the opportunity to point out to honourable members in a variety of debates in this house that the government has successfully undertaken what many had failed to do before; that is, to effectively put offside every stakeholder in the waste management field through the extraordinary measures it took last year to remove a substantial part of the funding of the waste authority and to turn those funds back into consolidated revenue. If there was ever a doubt that my comments in this place had substance, one need look no further than the 1 441 submissions on the state's draft waste strategy to see how many spoke about the ending of the hypothecation of the waste levy to the waste authority and how many made the point that until that hypothecation is back in place, waste management in this state will be very much at a disadvantage. Western Australia is certainly going to end up as something of an embarrassment when compared with other states that have in place far more effective funding sources.

**Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to standing orders.**