

## AIR SERVICES TO EXMOUTH

### *Statement*

**HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral)** [6.17 pm]: I will speak about the question I asked in this house on Tuesday, 13 September about tourist-package airline services to Exmouth. The answer I got to that question had a few holes in it. The question was about the announcement by the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure on 10 August that the preferred airline to fly into Exmouth, as a monopoly, was Skywest. It was to be given an exclusive license for a regulated non-jet regional airline network for the north west. I referred in my question to the advertisement in the *Sunday Times* of 28 August offering special airfares to Exmouth for \$388, including two nights accommodation, and to Broome for \$366, including three nights accommodation. Broome is an open destination with a competitive air service. These quotes are based on a jet service, not a Fokker 50, which normally travels these routes on the other days. If we examine this package, we find that the jet arrives in Learmonth, which is the airport for Exmouth, at 10.00 pm on Friday. By the time those people are transferred from Learmonth to Exmouth - a distance of some 36 kilometres - the time would be between 11.30 pm and 12 midnight. Those people with two nights accommodation must fly out again on Sunday, when the flight leaves at 1.45 pm. Once again, they have to travel 36 kilometres in going from the town back to the airport to catch that plane. If the first night is counted as a bit of a night, the passengers get one good night's sleep and one and a bit days in Exmouth. Therefore, it is hardly what I would call an equitable package in comparison with a three-day package, at a lesser cost, to Broome.

By the way, I also checked to see whether a three-night accommodation package could apply. The cost that was given to me was \$577, compared with \$366 for a return airfare plus GST and taxes. The reason that is the case is that it would be a Fokker 50 service, because the jet service cannot be used as part of the package that applies to that same air service travelling out of Broome. These quotes are also for 21 and 23 October. The quote for three-night package was from 21 to 24 October. That is nearly six weeks out. Therefore, to take advantage of these tourism packages, people would need to book well ahead. That is fine. However, this package is not what I would call tourist friendly. Exmouth relies heavily on an airline service, because it is on a peninsula and is some 356 kilometres from Carnarvon and some 1 250 kilometres from Perth. Interestingly, there is no longer an airline service between Carnarvon and Exmouth. It is no longer possible to fly to Exmouth. I find it ironic that the government is promoting the towns of Carnarvon and Exmouth as gateways to Ningaloo Reef, yet there is no connecting airline service to these important tourist destinations.

The tender document, which was tabled on 13 September as well, states on page 11, at point 2.8, "Licence Period", that each licence will be valid for five years, comprising three years with the option of a further two-year extension at the discretion of the minister. It states at point 2.9, "Additional Licences", that the minister may, at any time, consider other applications for a licence. Exmouth is a classic place in which a duopoly could apply. The two major tourist destinations in the north are Broome and Exmouth. There is also the magnificent Ningaloo Reef. We have had a debate in this house about extending the Ningaloo Marine Park. However, there is only a limited airline service to that area. This jet when it does fly through Exmouth is on its way to Broome. It is not designed for Exmouth. It is not sensible to have a monopoly airline service into a destination such as Exmouth and expect it to compete with a non-monopoly airline service that is operating in a competitive market and is able to offer cheaper prices than those into Exmouth.

The last part of the answer said that if a tourist wanted to stay another night in Exmouth under the \$388 package, it would cost an extra \$47.50, bringing the total cost of the three-night package to \$435.50. I have already proved that people cannot do that, because they cannot get back on the same jet service. It said also that this would make this package cheaper than 10 of the 12 packages listed for Broome under the same advertisement. What that really means is that they took the next lot of more expensive hotels and compared them with this package, so they were not even comparing apples with apples. Therefore, the answer from the minister was very disappointing to say the least. If we are to promote tourism in the north, and Carnarvon and Exmouth as gateways to Ningaloo Reef, then this government needs to look seriously at providing some competition in those towns.