

Metropolitan Cemeteries Board —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr J.N. Carey, Minister for Local Government.

Mr J. Fortuna, Acting Chief Executive Officer.

Mr A. Birch, Acting Chief Finance Officer.

Ms C. Comrie, Chief of Staff, Minister for Local Government.

Ms J. Colli, Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. Members may raise questions about matters relating to the operations and budget of the off-budget authority. Off-budget authority officers are recognised as ministerial advisers. It is the intention of the chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee, rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 1 October 2021. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice through the online questions system.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 579 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, the asset investment program and the heading "New Works". Is there an allocation included here for land acquisition or the exploration of fresh land for the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board?

Mr J.N. CAREY: Not in this budget, but we are looking at longer term potential future cemetery land in a number of areas. I might ask the acting CEO to provide a response.

[9.50 pm]

Mr J. Fortuna: In the current budget, no funds have been set aside for land acquisition. In terms of land acquisition, the government vests that in the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board as and when it is required. At the moment, we have several areas that the government is looking at to provide land for the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board. Land has already been secured at Whitby, and we will definitely need areas within the next 10 years after this budget period, so we are looking at Keralup and in the north-east urban corridor, as well as in the Yanchep and Alkimos areas.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Paragraph 1 refers to the total of \$38.3 million over the forward estimates period to provide for quality public cemetery services to meet increasing community expectations. I am sure the minister is aware of issues at Karrakatta Cemetery and some public concern about the ongoing removal of headstones and the repurposing of areas within the cemetery. Is the minister confident that he has done all the public consultation that could possibly have been done on these matters? Does he intend to undertake any of the work that the Saving Family Headstones at Karrakatta group has been asking for, including surveys et cetera, to determine public attitudes to the processes that will be undertaken there?

Mr J.N. CAREY: I will give a general comment. I understand that the particular group that the member has referred to is very passionate about the cause, but cemetery renewal is a standard practice around the world. The advice that I have always received—I say this sincerely—is that there is an extensive program of consultation, research and preparation of detailed redevelopment plans. I want to put on the record that prior to proposing the removal of any headstones, the board consults with a committee that comprises staff, board members, historians, architects and a representative of the Office of Australian War Graves. This ensures that all headstones are assessed across a wide range of criteria, including, but not limited to, stonemasonry craft, historical significance of the persons buried and the cause of death. The process for renewal also involves a 12-month consultation period, with a public notice placed in *The West Australian*, large signs installed in the renewal section of the cemetery, individual signs installed at the foot of each grave advising of redevelopment, and individual letters sent to known contacts. I also note that official war grave monuments are retained in their original grave position and official monuments are not affected by renewal programs.

I wanted to put all that on the public record because I see a lot of Facebook and social media activity, and I think there is some very unfair commentary about this hardworking board. I will ask the acting chief executive officer to make some comments.

Mr J. Fortuna: The cemetery redevelopment is a renewal of existing cemetery burial areas to accommodate new gravesites and memorial locations. The new graves are located alongside existing graves and, unlike the processes followed elsewhere, as the minister mentioned, no remains are disturbed, although the surface gets modified, but that is to accommodate new headstones, which need to be compliant with modern construction standards. The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has a well-established and managed process of cemetery renewal, allowing for the long-term sustainability of Western Australian cemeteries. At this time, the renewal affects only Karrakatta. However, under division 4 of part V of the Cemeteries Act, which is the redevelopment section, it applies to all cemeteries within Western Australia. That is what we are legislated under.

We continually review our processes to see how we can better engage with the community. At the moment, as the minister has mentioned, there is a 12-month consultation process. Sometimes those processes get extended, but we try to gather as much information from all sorts of contacts. We also have implemented a new cemetery records system, which allows us to capture any contact's details. If someone puts in an inquiry about a grave, we record that and they become a potential contact. When there is renewal within a particular area, and if that person is registered, they will get a mail-out and they will be able to participate in communication with the cemetery.

Mr J.N. CAREY: As a side note, in answer to a question in Parliament about the review of the Cemeteries Act, I indicated that the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries had sent email correspondence to representatives of the Saving Family Headstones at Karrakatta group in May this year inviting contributions to the review of the act overall. My office has encouraged the group to make a submission; in fact, I sent a letter on 20 July this year encouraging it to make a submission. I appreciate that the group has a different position, but I think there has been a genuine attempt. With the review of the act, we are saying, "Make a submission to the review of the act."

Mr R.S. LOVE: My understanding is that there has been quite a lengthy process of discussion for some people with the board. I had contact from people many years ago about the processes that were happening at Karrakatta, because often the country people I represent have family members who are buried there, so they have connections to it. It is an issue that is extremely sensitive for families. I appreciate that it is difficult for the board to do its job and ensure that the cemetery is maintained effectively. However, I put on the record that I have some sympathy for the views of the group in needing to ensure that family histories and traditions are respected.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Equally, I recognise the good job that the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board does. I have had the opportunity to visit the board and I have been given an extensive tour of the cemetery. I am certainly very grateful to the minister and the cemeteries board for that. The issue of the graves of ex-service people has been an ongoing and vexed issue. I just wonder whether there has been any resolution. I know a group of service people have been pursuing that issue. I appreciate that the graves of service people who are killed in war are undisturbed, but, obviously, this group's concern is that other service people's graves are being redeveloped alongside other graves. Has there been any rapprochement or development on that issue?

Mr J.N. CAREY: As the son of a veteran of the Second World War—he fought in East Timor—I want to put on the record that I obviously take this matter very seriously, but there has been some good work by the board in recent times in meeting and discussing issues with the RSLWA. I will hand over to the acting chief executive officer.

Mr J. Fortuna: The Metropolitan Cemeteries Board has met with the RSLWA and two sub-branches—Nedlands and Claremont. We are working with them to ensure that the graves and memorials of the soldiers are retained as best we can in accordance with how they would like it to be worked through. This past Monday, I met with the president of the Claremont sub-branch of the RSL and we are working through it step by step and procedure by procedure to ensure that their initiative and our practices remain aligned. They were aligned anyway, but they seem to have been misinterpreted at some point, so we are now bringing the consultation and the communication back together again. I think we are working extremely well in that regard. We are also engaging with the Office of Australian War Graves and streamlining our processes. At the moment, the Office of Australian War Graves stipulates that there can be only one official commemoration by choice of the next of kin. These commemorations may be placed either at the site where the soldier is interred or in an Office of Australian War Graves Garden of Remembrance. We are finding that there are numerous variations to that. Sometimes there are two and sometimes the RSL puts to the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board that the commemoration needs to be reinstated exactly where it was when it was removed as part of the cemetery renewal. However, we are looking to see how we can best make that work.

The CHAIR: That concludes the examination of the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board.