

EMERGENCY RESCUE HELICOPTER SERVICE — SOUTH WEST

Grievance

MR G.M. CASTRILLI (Bunbury) [9.25 am]: My grievance or plea, I suppose, this morning is to the Minister for Emergency Services. I bring to his attention the situation about the promised emergency rescue helicopter for the south west. I firstly say that I am extremely appreciative of the significant commitment made to the tune of \$15.3 million to deliver and operate the new south west emergency rescue helicopter service. In 2014–15, the funding of \$2.7 million has been provided for the construction of the base facility for the service. But, sadly, several recent traffic crashes near Bunbury have highlighted the need for this vital service to be based in our city. As the minister will be aware, the RAC rescue helicopter performs over 400 missions a year from its Perth base. Outside the metropolitan area, the greatest need for the rescue helicopter service is in the south west where our population has boomed. Outside the metropolitan area, the south west is the most populous area in Western Australia. Over the past five years, the south west's average annual growth has been around 2.8 per cent. The City of Bunbury itself is home to more than about 33 000 to 34 000 people with the population of greater Bunbury sitting around 83 000 people. However, as the administration and service centre of the region, Bunbury serves the south west population of about 160 000 people.

The south west has the distinction of being the most popular regional tourist destination in Western Australia. Bunbury is the social and economic hub of the south west and is central to major industries in the region. It is also at the heart of recreational and sporting activities, and is surrounded by a mecca of camping, water sports and wilderness areas that attract tourists and residents alike. Unfortunately, these locations also have the potential to result in people needing to be evacuated if an accident occurs or they become unwell in a remote area. Therefore, Bunbury's central location means that we are the logical choice for the new helicopter service. Bunbury is serviced by an airport that is close to the town centre, and is easily accessible via the South Western Highway from Boyanup.

We are also extremely well serviced by the South West Health Campus, which I am sure the minister is aware of, and I suspect that some patients from other parts of the region would need to be flown to that campus in an emergency. The South West Health Campus has the only regional intensive care unit in the state, and our emergency service department upgrade has recently been completed doubling the emergency department capacity. The campus is supported by a raft of specialists and surgeons based in Bunbury and it has the capacity for rehabilitation services.

The south west rescue helicopter would not be an attempt to replicate or take away from the important work done by the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Although the exact model of service has not been decided as yet, as I understand it, it is expected that it would serve as either a search and rescue function or as aeromedical transport. I understand that the likely model would see a paramedic attached to the helicopter service. I believe we simply cannot replicate the service available in Perth, but must thoroughly investigate the needs of the south west population to determine the best model for operating in a regional area. However, what is essential is that it be based in the centre of the South West, which is Bunbury. The state government currently provides around \$5 million per year for the metropolitan rescue helicopter. It could be expected that the south west service would result in savings to this program as a result of lesser distances needing to be travelled by the Perth RAC chopper. However, the main focus is the need for a quicker response to help save lives in the south west. The RAC helicopter has a range of about 200 kilometres, as I understand it, which essentially means that if rescues are made further south than Bunbury, the chopper may need to stop and refuel, and that will cost vital time. Basing the new rescue helicopter in Bunbury would alleviate this aspect and make rescue times quicker and more successful. An emergency rescue helicopter based in Bunbury would deliver a raft of benefits to the community, the WA Country Health Service, the police and St John Ambulance by working with them and taking pressure off where necessary.

I urge the minister to do everything he possibly can to ensure that the south west emergency rescue helicopter service is based in Bunbury. This is extremely important in helping to meet the needs of our growing population now and into the future. I think it makes sense and I am really pushing the minister to say yes, it will be in Bunbury. I am waiting in hope.

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services) [9.31 am]: I thank the member for Bunbury for his grievance. He is 100 per cent right about the population pressures, the infrastructure growth and the demands coming out of the south west, which is why, at the last election, the government committed to spend over \$15 million in providing a second rescue helicopter for the south west. We can look at not just the mining industry growth down there, but also the population growth. Obviously, a lot of members from this chamber were in Bunbury earlier this year. A large number of people are choosing to make Bunbury their home, and there is a massive upgrade of road infrastructure down there. The member is absolutely right: the south west is the peak tourist destination in Western Australia. Many people drive down there, and it is not just from Perth to

Margaret River; it is from Perth to Denmark, Albany, Esperance, Manjimup and all those wonderful little towns that lie between here and Esperance. We have to realise that when we are away from the metropolitan area, help is that much further away. It is a long way for a volunteer fire and rescue team to go to attend a road crash, and in some instances it is also a long way for the Royal Flying Doctor Service to go. The RFDS does a wonderful job and no-one will ever detract from that. I am a big fan of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. In fact, I am attending its annual fundraising lunch, I think, this coming Saturday, in the member for Darling Range's electorate. However, the RFDS does not do cliff-face rescues. It is very limited, I guess. It does a great job with patient transfers, but it does not do rescues, and it certainly does not have the ability to run a helicopter, which, obviously, because of its stability and ability to hover, has so many more options when it comes to pulling people out of difficult situations. I drove down to the capes area recently. We opened five new volunteer fire stations down there. I could not help but notice the massive growth and the traffic being held up because of all the roadworks. The face of the south west is obviously changing.

When we are looking at these things, we need to keep in mind that, as a government, we have a duty to provide the best rescue service that we possibly can. That included, going into the last election, considering the option to have a second rescue helicopter. The reasons for that are pretty much what the member for Bunbury outlined. The current range of the RAC chopper is 400 kilometres, so on a return radius, including hovering time, it is about 200 kilometres. As soon as we draw a 200-kilometre circle around Perth, we start to realise that it has its limitations, and if we are to have a second helicopter, it is obviously going to end up in the south west somewhere. A chopper based in the south west would also provide a service that could travel further north. If it were to be located in Bunbury, it would be able to travel further north than Bunbury. If, for example, the current RAC chopper was deployed up at Lancelin, that would leave everywhere south of Perth pretty much uncovered. So it makes perfect sense to have a second helicopter. It is the right thing to do.

Obviously, the member has seen in this year's budget a commitment of \$2.7 million—\$1.7 million in the coming financial year and \$1 million in the financial year after that—to establish the base. At the moment, we are in the process of looking at options for where it will be located, so bringing this grievance to me today was the right thing to do. It is very timely, because, obviously, government is in the process of working out the best location. We need to consider a number of different issues when we are looking at locations, such as, as I said, the range of the current helicopter and population centres in the south west. That is very important. We cannot have a helicopter in every little country town, so we want to be able to cover as many people as possible within the shortest flying distance. As the member rightly pointed out, proximity to hospitals, especially hospitals with an intensive care unit, is very important. I understand that Bunbury Hospital has an intensive care unit. We must consider the distance back to Perth from wherever the helicopter might be located. The Fiona Stanley Hospital will kick off next year, and there is a massive helicopter landing pad on the top of the hospital, so we would be able to transfer people directly from a site in the south west to Fiona Stanley Hospital, if required, for even more specialist care. The distance to other regional hubs is important, so that we could transfer a patient from a smaller town to a locality that has an airport and do a fixed-wing transfer. Once again, other than Albany, Bunbury has probably one of the biggest airports in the south west. The flying range of the second helicopter that we are looking at will be key to this calculation. Also, although it may sound morbid, the historical statistics of previous road crash incidents and rescues will be considered. Without even looking at that now, I would probably guess that those statistics will be higher in the areas of greater population such as Bunbury.

On face value, Bunbury looks like a logical choice to me. Obviously, the process in government means that we have to go through all the proper checks and balances. We do not base these decisions as to where we will locate a potential \$15 million asset on politics; it has to be done on actual statistics on where we would be able to provide the best service for the people of Western Australia for the money that we are spending. Obviously, we are finalising the tender process at the moment. However, member for Bunbury, I can undertake that today I will talk to the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner and put all of the member's thoughts into the mix. I think the member makes a very good case for the helicopter to be housed and located in Bunbury, not to mention the support jobs that will be able to come from the member's community, which has a bigger population from which to draw more expert staff for a helicopter such as this, including the maintenance and the medical staff. I will take it all on board and do everything I can to make that happen for the member for Bunbury.