

KEWDALE–FREMANTLE RAIL FREIGHT LINE

Grievance

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot) [9.30 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Transport. As the minister knows, a freight line runs from the Kewdale area through the member for Southern River's electorate, my electorate of Jandakot and the member for Cockburn's electorate. It then splits and goes out towards the port of Fremantle and further south out to the Kwinana grain terminal. Of particular concern to the residents in my electorate is the impact on their lifestyle, not so much from the noise but more so the vibrations from trains running on this train line.

The residents around the suburb of Glen Iris and further west towards North Lake Road—previously, I understand, the member for Southern River's electorate—have experienced interference in their lives for some time through the vibrations and noise coming from the trains running on this line. Lately—I guess in the past 12 months—the residents around Glen Iris have contacted me to say that there has been a noticeable increase in the vibrations coming from trains on the line and a noticeable increase in the frequency of trains. I suspect part of that is because of the time of year; the fact that after the grain harvest a lot more heavy grain trains run out towards the grain terminal at Kwinana. The issue is not so much the time or even the frequency of the trains, it is the vibrations through the houses, partly because of the speed at which the trains travel. I know that trains have to slow down at level crossings. The nearest crossing from that Glen Iris part of the world is North Lake Road, which is just over two kilometres away. By law, the trains have to slow down eventually to cross North Lake Road, where there is a plain level crossing. The trains travel east–west in both directions and carry goods. The trains carrying grain are hauling fully loaded grain trailers heading west and are empty heading back east, because we do not import grain. I have visited homes to speak to many affected residents in Glen Iris Drive. Although the noise itself is an issue that affects their outdoor lifestyle, of particular concern is the damage being done by the vibrations. I note that the members for Southern River and Cockburn have pointed out to me that similar concerns have been raised with them.

I understand the freight rail line is operated by Brookfield Rail, formerly called WestNet Rail, so basically it is privately operated. The maximum speed that the trains are supposed to travel at is 80 kilometres an hour—I may stand corrected on that. In 2009, the minister would be aware that the Department of Planning conducted a state review of planning policy on road and rail transport noise and freight considerations in land use planning, with the aim of establishing a standardised set of criteria. My understanding, however, is that the proposals would not be retrospective and would only relate to future land use planning. Although this will prevent further urban encroachment, it will not help the constituents who live behind and beside this freight line as it stands. I know that the residents of Glen Iris Drive and other affected areas are fairly well aware of the principles of buyer beware. Most residents were well aware of the presence of a freight line running behind their back fences when they purchased their houses. However, some of these people have been living there for years and this is an increasing problem. Whether it is a technical problem or an operational problem, I am not exactly sure. The member for Southern River told me that some problems have been cured in the past by machining the wheels of the trains, or an engineering or operational solution such as slowing the trains down a little. I am not sure; I am not an expert on driving trains—they are somewhat different to submarines! Legally, the trains have to slow down eventually when they pass level crossings. No doubt there is a lot of pressure on train drivers to keep to a certain timetable and move as much freight as possible in the hours they work.

I have stood at the back of some of the affected houses. I have stood in the bedrooms of these houses. It can be best described as a small earthquake when these trains go past. The houses shake, the pictures move, and the glass in the windows rattles. Some of these residents are elderly. It ruins their lives—they cannot sleep at night. I have taken a couple of pictures of some cracks in the walls associated with this rail line. Clearly, they are not small cracks in plaster. I am particularly concerned also that a weakened wall could cause an unfortunate accident as, clearly, foundations have moved. Rather than seeking leave to lay the photos on the table of the house, I will pass them to the minister when I have finished. This photo shows a crack in the wall of a house. These are cracks in walls. They are obviously quite thick brick walls between neighbours' back fences. My concern is that this could result in an unfortunate accident. I am hesitant to guess who would actually be liable if a wall is cracking to that degree because of vibrations from a train. That is a fairly serious concern. I do not know who would be culpable in the event of an accident. I hope the residents are not left to pool together in some kind of class action to find a solution to these issues. It is a principle that they knew there was a train line there, but I do not think anyone, when they bought their rather substantial houses there, ever signed up for this kind of interference in their lives. I ask the minister if he can give some guidance about what options are open to the residents affected by this rail line and its operation, and if we can look into what we can do to help them out.

MR T.R. BUSWELL (Vasse — Minister for Transport) [9.37 am]: I thank the member for Jandakot for raising a difficult issue. I also thank him for the photos. As the member rightly points out, if this land were to be

subdivided now, with a rail corridor through the middle, there would be a much more significant degree of physical separation between the railway line and the residents. There may also be other treatments along the edge of the railway line to deal with amenity issues such as noise. That is the way it is now. We are doing a lot of work to protect our rail and transport corridors for that very reason, so that as rail use grows we do not get these sorts of conflicts. The problem is, as the member pointed out, those planning policies are in place in “State Planning Policy 5.4: Road and Rail Transport Noise and Freight Considerations in Land Use Planning”. It would be physically impossible to apply those retrospectively, particularly in this case where people live very close to the railway line.

The other factor that complicates matters—really, from Midland right through to the coast—is the increased use of the railway line. That is driven by a number of factors. I have been out with the member for Southern River and stood on the railway line—not on it, because a train came and we got off, but near the railway line in his electorate, where there are some noise amenity issues as well. The increased use has been driven by increased container trade through the port of Fremantle. The port of Fremantle’s current container movements are around 600 000 twenty-foot equivalent units a year. That will grow to about 1.2 million, so there will be continued growth. There has been a big jump in bulk cargoes freighted out of Fremantle in particular. I think that is having a big impact. It is not just the grain the member referred to; iron ore and coal are also now going out through the outer Fremantle harbour at Kwinana. A range of other commodities now go through Fremantle. Inevitably, there will be more bulk commodity exports out of Kwinana as we resolve issues around additional bulk ports. I suspect this may well become a bigger rather than a smaller issue simply because of the growth.

When I am next down in the member for Jandakot’s electorate, which happens quite frequently now, as we tour around in his ute and I bring my AC/DC music on my new iPod Nano—whatever it is; a little one—perhaps a good course of action would be to meet these folk. I would not mind having a look and having a chat with them to get an understanding of how they are physically located relative to the railway line. Then I will sit down with Brookfield Rail to understand what we can do. It may well be that the solution is engineering related, as the member previously alluded. It may well be that the solution will involve changes to speed. I do not know, but it is important to initiate the process to understand what we can do to help these people, because everybody knows that the volume of rail traffic will only increase and therefore we need to do something to try to resolve the issue not only for today but in the future. My concern is that if we do not do anything, firstly the vibration problem is obviously impacting residents’ amenity now, and secondly there will come a time, down the track, when these people want to sell their homes and they will have to deal with not only the issues of being located next to a railway line—which everybody understands when they buy a property—but also these unintended consequences of living near a railway line. I think the member for Jandakot makes a good point; namely, these people understood that they were buying next to a railway line and would have anticipated that trains use the line. But they probably did not anticipate—I do not think that it would be reasonable to anticipate—that the vibrations from those trains would have the capacity to cause structural damage to their homes. We need to work through a bit of a process. The problem will not be solved within a couple of weeks, but by bringing this grievance and drawing the matter to my attention today, the member for Jandakot has kick-started a process that will now follow through. Again, to clarify, I would like to visit when I am next in the electorate. I think that I have to come down to have a look at a couple of roads in the not-too-distant future and —

Dr A.D. Buti: Are you coming before or after you visit Armadale?

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: I am out and about a lot nowadays.

Dr A.D. Buti: Yes, I know; you are coming out my way.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: The staff in my ministerial office think that is great.

Several members interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: We will meet the people and it will be good to have a firsthand look. Then I will meet with the Department of Transport about what we can do to engage with Brookfield. I am not going to speculate on what the solution could be—it may be engineering; it may be speed related.

Mr P. Abetz: The trains should not cause any vibration. The vibrations are actually caused by the wheels being out-of-round, that is, getting flat spots, and it is simply a matter of machining them regularly. I raised the matter with the train operators because we had a major problem at Nicholson Road. The operator machined the wheels and it reduced the problem, but it seems to be coming back again.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Interestingly, member, if it has reduced the problem on your bit of track why has it not —

Mr P. Abetz: It is coming back again. They need to do it again.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Maybe it is a localised wobbly wheel issue!

Mr P. Abetz: And rail conditions.

Mr J.M. Francis interjected.

Mr T.R. BUSWELL: Whatever the issue is—I am sorry, Mr Speaker; I wobbled off a bit there!—we will try to identify it and work forward. It may well be engineering. It could be speed related. I do not know. But if we all expect that the use of that rail line will increase, and it will, we are going to need some solutions because we cannot have a significant negative impact on people who live along the railway line.