

POWER POLES — LEEMING

Grievance

MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.52 am]: My grievance is to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Energy. I start by congratulating my friend the member for Riverton on his appointment as a parliamentary secretary. It is weird standing here doing a grievance to someone sitting right next to me!

The issue of power poles on Gladstone Road, Leeming, in my electorate was first brought to my attention as a by-product of proposed works by Western Power, which had plans to upgrade existing power poles and install a transformer on a residential property. One resident who has an existing power pole on their property in Gladstone Road was first made aware of the upgrade in late January this year—only about six months ago—when they were notified of the proposal by Cabling WA. After contacting its underground supervisor, the resident was informed that the work would be minimal, with only two new lines running to the pole and the replacement of two old poles. I understood the works were required due to a new house being built nearby, with the current power supply being insufficient for its needs. The work was scheduled to commence in late February but was postponed due to local residents receiving conflicting starting dates.

The materials placed on the resident's verge in readiness for the works were not in line with a simple upgrade to the pole, and upon further investigation the resident was informed that the works were to include a fairly big and ugly transformer being installed on their property. The transformer would have been right above their children's bedrooms. Generally, transformers are not installed so close to a residential property, as is the case on Wheatley Road, Bull Creek, in the member for Bateman's electorate. I had a look at one and the transformer was 15 metres away from a residential property. I am not sure what the standard is, but it is some distance away. This is when the resident in question sought my help to prevent the transformer from being installed. After consultation with Western Power and the office of the Minister for Energy, who was very, very helpful in assisting to put these works on hold, an immediate resolution was obtained, with the transformer being installed further away on council land and not adjacent to any residential properties. Western Power apologised for not consulting local residents on the type of upgrade.

I was inundated by residents of Gladstone Road and Jefferies Way, Leeming, with their opposition to installing the transformer on a residential property. I was also inundated with requests that the existing power poles not be replaced with new power poles, and that brings me to the crux of my grievance. There is a 400-metre stretch on one side of Gladstone Road that has above-ground power poles. The remainder of the street, including the other side of the road, has underground power, notably, as does the rest of the entire suburb. There is just one side of one street in Leeming in which there is not underground power. The suburb's powerlines were undergrounded in the 1980s or immediately laid underground with new housing estates as they were rolled out. Understandably, residents would like uniformity with all the powerlines being installed below ground, as is the case in the rest of the suburb of Leeming. Presently, the power poles are an eyesore. There is a perception in the community that they degrade property values, and their age and state of disrepair pose a potential danger to residents. Cars have crashed into the poles and, in storms, trees fall on the lines, so, obviously, power to houses is cut off when that happens.

The underground power program was established in 1996 to improve the standard of electricity supply to households after it was found that 80 per cent of outages were caused by trees falling on overhead lines. As of January 2011, 51 per cent of houses in the Perth metropolitan area now enjoy underground power. All new suburbs are automatically built with underground power. I understand two types of projects are offered by the program—major residential projects that include the undergrounding of an entire suburb; or localised enhancement projects that include beautifying a tourism precinct, for example, or regional areas. The underground power project is funded 50 per cent by local governments through ratepayers who directly benefit; 25 per cent by the state government; and 25 per cent by Western Power. The priorities for underground power are generally set by local government. After consultation with the City of Melville, I found that the Gladstone Road stretch does not fit any of the above criteria, and I am informed that if an application to the Office of Energy is submitted by the City of Melville to underground this stretch, it will be rejected. Both the City of Melville and Western Power are unclear about why this stretch of powerlines was not done when the rest of the suburb powerlines were undergrounded.

The City of Melville has written to Western Power requesting that it consider undergrounding the 400 metres of overhead powerlines on Gladstone Road as part of its future works program. I have also written in support of this. Disappointingly, Western Power has declined to include the undergrounding of these lines in its future works program. Western Power believes it is financially unviable at this time. My question is: if it is financially unviable at this time, will it be financially viable at any time in the future? Western Power has also expressed

that its future works program is based on a risk-management framework to give priority to areas of the network in most need of augmentation or replacement. These nearly 40-year-old poles are getting older and more decrepit with each passing year, obviously becoming more of a risk. I would like to know also how replacing existing poles with new poles, considering the aim of having all of the metropolitan area's power undergrounded, makes good sense. It is not really a policy that is reflective of cost-effective policies to replace old poles with new poles. This particular 400-metre stretch of above-ground power poles in Leeming seems to have been forgotten by Western Power over the past 30 years. Residents would like to have uniformity in their street, as I said, with the lines sunk below ground in the rest of the suburb, without these unsightly poles.

I guess I would like a solution to be based on undergrounding these powerlines in the short term, whether it involves Western Power including the project in its future works program or a joint approach, in which the project can be funded by both Western Power and the City of Melville. If we are to spend money on replacing old power poles with new poles, which is not a cheap exercise, why do we not just bite the bullet and get it done? As I said, it is only 400 metres on one side of a street, and is the only stretch in the entire suburb of Leeming that seems to have been forgotten. I appreciate the parliamentary secretary's time and, once again, congratulate him on his appointment.

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.59 am]: I would like to congratulate the member for Jandakot on his appointment as a parliamentary secretary.

The issue of underground power, which is the essence of this grievance, is one I have dealt with in my own electorate quite often. I have been informed that Western Power has addressed the first issue—that is, the magnitude of the upgrade and the transformer—to the member for Jandakot's satisfaction. The remaining issue is that 400 metres of Gladstone Road, Leeming, will not be provided with underground power, and why is that so and what can we do about it? There are three areas in Parkwood that have identical problems. In Parkwood, at least, a subdivision was built in the 1980s and the developer decided off its own back to install underground power and then some poles were connected. At that time a lot of developers were putting things underground.

Western Power is a regulated monopoly, which Julia Gillard seems to have forgotten recently. It has to submit its request for investments to the Economic Regulation Authority of WA, and under those regulations it has certain operating procedures for what it can and cannot do. If it puts money into poles or underground power, it has to assure the regulator that it is economically beneficial to do so; that is, it can do so only if the existing facilities are worn out and need full replacement or, in fact, there is some economic benefit to be gained from new and different types of investment. Western Power has looked at this repeatedly and it says that the existing facilities do not of themselves warrant upgrading to underground power. Western Power has written to the City of Melville and suggested a couple of alternative routes: one is that the City of Melville puts the money forward itself. I have not been told by Western Power what the response was, but I take it that the City of Melville probably said thanks but no thanks. The other alternative, as the member for Jandakot indicated in his grievance, relates to a longstanding policy since 1996 of systematically putting existing facilities underground. This has been a very popular, longstanding program but it has become increasingly controversial, especially as it has been rolled out from the western suburbs—from the wealthier to the poorer areas. There was also an issue about sharing arrangements, so the government decided that the Public Utilities Office and the Department of Finance should conduct a review of that, which is pending. Hopefully, that will provide us some difference in guidelines on the criteria. From my own perspective—I am not speaking on behalf of the minister—we have to adjust somewhat, because we need more flexibility in that program as it goes to places where a large number of people do not want it —

Mr J.M. Francis interjected.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: — and it goes to people who do want it. Western Power has decided where to put underground power on the basis of age and propensity for outages. For instance, in my electorate it has been gazetted for Parkwood, and I have had nothing but protests, often from lower income people; then in adjacent suburbs such as Shelley and Rossmoyne, people have been protesting for years about the lack of it. We have an allocation problem. Hopefully, the Public Utilities Office review will assess some of these things. Stage 5 of the rollout of underground power has been gazetted and is out there for debate. Under the new regulations, stage 6 will be put in place following the review and that will be looked at over the next 12 months. We suggest strongly that the City of Melville include this 400 metres in Gladstone Road in its submission and make the argument that perhaps it is not due to outages but the need to continue the existing policy to underground power in the outer suburbs. Hopefully, the review will give Western Power, which runs this thing, a little more flexibility in addressing these anomalies that the member for Jandakot has identified. That is probably the best way to go about it. As I understand it, Western Power has urged the City of Melville to do that and, depending on the outcome of the Public Utilities Office review, will look at it positively. As we go further and further into laying out underground power, we will get into more anomalies and problems in which some places have it, such as

Parkwood and Leeming, whereas the adjacent suburbs do not have it and they want it. My recommendation is that the member for Jandakot urges the City of Melville to include that issue when it puts together its submission for stage 6 of the underground power program.