

**VASSE — CAREER FIRE AND RESCUE STATION**

*Grievance*

**MS L. METTAM (Vasse)** [9.55 am]: I thank the Minister for Emergency Services for taking this grievance regarding a career fire and rescue station in the electorate of Vasse. As the minister will be aware, the electorate of Vasse is one of the state's growth areas, with a population exceeding 30 000. It is also a thriving tourist destination, which accounts for significant seasonal fluctuations in the population. The electorate of Vasse incorporates a number of regional centres, which although growing in size and density, are geographically dispersed over greater distances than many other electorates. The electorate of Vasse covers more than 2 600 square kilometres of the state's south west region.

With greater population density comes the requirement to increase the range and level of community services and infrastructure. One of the most important proposed new infrastructure projects is a new career fire and rescue station in Vasse. It is essential that career firefighters, with their professional skills and experience, are assigned to a new facility. Although I acknowledge that we all have our part to play in the shared responsibility of fire prevention, the establishment of a new career fire station would ensure that response times in the south west region are significantly reduced. At present, the closest career fire station is in Bunbury, which results in significant delays in providing back-up to the local brigades within the wider Vasse region.

As the minister will be aware, a land exchange has been negotiated with the City of Busselton to provide a site for a career station at Vasse. This is already a win for the Liberal–National government because normally we would have to pay commercial land value when acquiring land for future stations. To secure this land, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services relinquished an area behind the existing volunteer station in exchange for the new and much larger site at Vasse. This is a significant achievement.

A career fire station in Vasse will address the current and urgent demands in the Vasse electorate and surrounding areas, which may be captured by the following, pressing figures. The current volunteer fire and rescue brigade in Busselton responds to more than 200 jobs per annum. This number will only continue to grow with the ongoing expansion of the City of Busselton and surrounding areas. The Dunsborough and Margaret River VFRS brigades also respond to more than 100 calls per annum each, so again, the workload on these volunteers continues to climb. These three brigades are responding to 40 to 50 serious road crashes per annum, in either lead or support capacity.

The establishment of a career fire station at Vasse will also provide significant support to these three brigades for road crash rescue, structure fires and hazmat response. In particular, it will reduce load on volunteers during business hours, reducing the impact on businesses and self-employed volunteers in times of requirement and need. The career staff will provide support to the region through the provision of training to volunteers and also the provision of some capacity to backfill DFES staff positions during leave. A career fire station in Vasse will also bring significant skills to the area, as well as provide support to the local community, businesses and schools through their families that may move to the region. Although not substituting for a fully resourced dedicated airport fire service, it will also improve response capacity and capability to the Busselton Regional Airport. The current airport and planned expansion does not have a fire service other than volunteers responding from Busselton.

As I have highlighted, this important matter deserves attention and I hope there is something that can be done to address this important issue.

**MR J.M. FRANCIS (Jandakot — Minister for Emergency Services)** [10.00 am]: I thank the member for Vasse for her grievance. She constantly supports the people she represents and argues for good causes in her electorate, and I give all credit to her. I will begin by agreeing with her: the Vasse region is one of the big growth areas in regional Western Australia, for a very good reason. It is at the doorstep of the Margaret River tourist region. It is a wonderfully spectacular place to not only visit but also live in. That is why the member is seeing the population increase in those areas of her electorate, as is happening in other parts of Western Australia, where whole towns are growing up in tourism areas.

The government has already invested significantly in the emergency service support infrastructure in the member's electorate. The big one, a few years ago, was the capes enhancement project, in which we spent some \$7 million significantly upgrading resources for fire stations, if the member remembers, at Dunsborough, Yallingup Coastal, Cowaramup, Wallcliffe and Witchcliffe. Those stations, albeit volunteer stations and some of them dual registered, provide a significant resource to the emergency services response in the member's electorate. On top of that, the second rescue helicopter, based in Bunbury, is already doing an amazing job getting people injured in road crashes to critical care medical treatment much faster. We know that every single second counts when it comes to saving lives. In the last four years there has been a significant investment in

emergency services in the member's electorate, and all credit to the member and her predecessor for advocating for and delivering these things.

The population of the Vasse area is expected to increase to around 5 000 in the near future. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services works out where to allocate resources. In this case we are talking about a full-time staff career fire station that does both fire and rescue, so it involves everything from structure fires to road crash rescue, maintaining and checking fire hydrants and certification for buildings. The department works out where these things are going to go, on what it calls a risk-to-resource ratio basis. We cannot have a career fire station in every country town, and every country town does not need one. However, when population centres grow to the point at which there is greater demand, although, as the member pointed out, volunteers do an outstanding job, they cannot do everything. They cannot turn out during working hours as much as they can after hours, in many circumstances.

There will come a time when a town's population grows to the point at which it needs a career fire station. That will not diminish volunteers' responsibility for or their contribution to the fire and rescue service. I have only to look at other towns that have grown to similar populations, such as Geraldton, which has a career fire station backed up by a volunteer fire station. Some \$9 million is being spent in Albany on a new career fire station. It is nearly finished, and I will have to go down sometime and check on its progress. A few years ago a new volunteer fire and rescue station was built in Albany, so the Albany career station is backed up by Albany volunteers. No doubt, the member for Eyre will see the population in Esperance grow to the point at which he can get these resources.

The electorate of Vasse is on the cusp of reaching that risk-to-resource ratio point at which the area will be considered for a career fire station, simply because of the population growth. The member made a great point that I had not thought of: the area has a significant transient population. I will have to check with the commissioner and the department to see whether they actually take that into account—I hope they do—when they look at the risk-to-resource requirements for any particular area. As the member pointed out, a land swap is being finalised, and it will greatly reduce the cost if the Department of Fire and Emergency Services does not have to buy the land to build a new career fire station. At the end of the day, these things come down to money. That will make it far more financially viable for the department and therefore the taxpayers of Western Australia. I understand that, once it is fully approved, that land swap will secure just over 8 000 square metres in Vasse for a location for a career fire station. That is very good news. If we have the footprint and we have the land, we can start to look at the funding.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services has a strategic asset plan for where it will prioritise career fire and rescue stations, and any other investment in emergency services for that matter. I have always believed that, as the minister, it would be wrong for me to dictate where those resources go. They should be allocated on a scientific census basis, and an assessment of the needs of a community, rather than how it votes. That is the right thing to do, but I will undertake to have the department go back and review the risk-to-resource ratio, taking into account many of the points raised by the member for Vasse, to find out where it sits on the list of priorities. From the points made by the member, I can understand her electorate would be almost next in line. I will provide her with some further information in the very near future. She has made a very good case arguing for a new career fire station for her electorate, and all credit to her.