

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Wednesday, 24 May 2023]

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Chair; Mr Shane Love; Mr Reece Whitby; Mrs Jessica Stojkovski; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Stuart Aubrey; Dr David Honey

Division 41: Water and Environmental Regulation — Service 5, Environment; Climate Action, \$46 495 000 —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment; Climate Action.

Ms M. Andrews, Director General.

Ms H. Manderson, Chief Finance Officer.

Mr A. Wiley, Director, Waste.

Mr D. Nevin, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Mr S. Meredith, Executive Director, Green Energy.

Ms E. Briggs, Deputy Director General, Climate and Sustainability.

Mr D. O'Reilly, Deputy Director General, Strategy and Performance.

Ms K. Faulkner, Executive Director, Compliance and Enforcement.

Ms A. Lam, Senior Manager, Native Vegetation Strategy.

Ms M. Juesten, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 2 June 2023. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

I give the call to the member for Moore.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I must admit, I am struggling to understand how the department now works, because we have service 5 of this division, which Minister Whitby is here to discuss, and then tonight we have service 5 again with a different minister. I am not sure how we divvy up this service area. Perhaps I will have to ask the minister to explain how it is that he and Minister McGurk share this particular service of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, and how that all works in practice.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member. In very short order, Minister McGurk has water and I have environmental regulation.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Has the minister ever thought of making a service area of water regulation and another of environmental regulation so that each minister could claim their own area?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The state budget is an instrument of Treasury so maybe putting a question to them would have been good. The agency is arranged in this way to gain efficiencies in regulation. Obviously, having the same teams and regulatory infrastructure for the regulation of water and the environment rather than creating separate pods of regulatory services for each means efficiencies in government.

The CHAIR: Member, maybe your next question will actually be related to the budget, please. It is all good having these conversations, but you asked the question. The minister will say yes or no; he can answer or not.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is actually not philosophical. It is trying to understand how the department functions and performs the tasks.

The CHAIR: Member, do you have a question relating to a particular line item?

Mr R.S. LOVE: My question is —

The CHAIR: No—the line item. Preface what you are talking about, please.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: And a page number, please.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is a line item. It is service 5. We could talk about the 95 full-time equivalent employees.

The CHAIR: Which page?

Mr R.S. LOVE: The same page that I mentioned before, chair.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am not sure the member did mention a page earlier, sorry.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is page 678, service 5, which is the service we are discussing. Apologies if I did not refer to the page before.

There are 95 people budgeted to be working under service 5 in the coming year. Can the minister explain to me how many will be working in the area of environment and how many in the area of water?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member. I will get Michelle Andrews to respond.

Ms M. Andrews: Thank you for the question, member. As part of the broader machinery-of-government changes and the intention to bring together a number of departments back in 2017, there was opportunity for efficiency and effectiveness outcomes by bringing together some of those functions. Certainly, this policy area is one of those. We have people in that policy area who work on both environment and water policy. It is similar in other areas that we provide services, as well. Compliance and enforcement would be another area.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The minister can see the problem I face when I am expected to ask questions on a budget in which everything is jumbled up in such a way that we cannot even distinguish which employees are actually working in the area of the minister's responsibility. References to division 41 become something of a nonsense. Perhaps we have to talk more about budget paper No 3 and what is in there for the climate action fund. I understand from the description in the estimates schedule that the minister is actually here in his capacity as Minister for Climate Action. Is that correct?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Am I the climate action minister? Yes, I am.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The schedule lists it as "Service 5: Environment", and then "Climate Action". I assume that the minister is here as the climate action minister; is that correct?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is correct.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Therefore, this is an opportunity to talk about the government's climate action program rather than delivery of service 5, because that is almost impossible to do.

[4.40 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I would not have said it was impossible, member. We are talking about some particular numbers against each service area by FTE. I make the point that when a person is involved in policy formation, they bring skills that would apply equally to the regulation of water and the regulation of the environment. It is not a case of this person doing one job and this other person performing a specific role; their skills are available to perform in both areas. Does the member have a question?

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a question around the interaction between the policy development that takes place within this department and the broader government announcements around climate action. Is this the area that is principally involved in delivering policies that develop into government policies that result in actions like ending coal as a source of energy generation? It obviously had a role in ending the logging of native forests and decisions like that. In respect of the government's areas of climate action, is this the body that drives the policy behind those changes?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Member, climate action is a huge challenge not just for Western Australia, but for the planet. As such, it involves responses in many policy areas and in many portfolio areas. There is no one agency that has responsibility to respond to that. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation is a lead agency for that response, but it also involves other agencies—energy policy, transport, agriculture and the natural environment. If the member wants to ask particular questions that involve transport or the production of coal in Collie or whatever the issue is that may be related to climate change, there are other relevant portfolios and he needs to be precise about where he asks his questions. I will do my best to respond to the member about the issues this agency is responsible for, but it is a cross-government response. I am not going to speak to issues that relate to, for example, the upgrading of the south west interconnected system grid in response to the need to increase electrification and reduce emissions by ending the production of coal and coal-fired energy production in Collie; those are matters for another minister. If the member wants to ask a question about climate change that we can respond to, we will do our best to do so; otherwise, we can refer the member to another minister.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I thank the minister. Further to that, the minister is the designated Minister for Climate Action. In that capacity, is this the group that primarily supports the minister in his capacity as Minister for Climate Action?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: This agency is the lead agency in terms of our response, but we are collaborative and cooperative with our colleagues across government.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I turn to page 143 of budget paper No 3, because there are very few figures I can use in budget paper No 2. I refer to the line item “Climate Action Fund—Green Energy Approvals”, under the broader heading “Water and Environmental Regulation”. Can the minister expand on the \$31.8 million over the forward estimates to accelerate environmental approvals for green energy proposals? How will that work and what will the government do to measure whether it achieves any outcomes in making sure that there is a wide range of matters taken into account when assessing these new projects?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am happy to respond to this; it is an appropriate question for me. The green energy approvals initiative is a very important step that the government is taking. The intention is to recognise that Western Australia can play a critical role in developing critical minerals and other materials that are important for providing infrastructure for renewable energy. There is a whole range of initiatives and approvals processes that will help our response to climate change and help reduce emissions. Based on that, we are very keen to ensure that we have an efficient and rapid approvals process—one that deals with approvals as efficiently as possible but also takes account of environmental impacts in the most robust way, to ensure that environmental standards are protected.

We have created this new unit and it will begin operation of the green energy approvals process on 1 July this year. It is important. We have been talking to industry and it is very excited about and supportive of this approach. It is also about attracting very progressive and skilled people to the role of being able to approve these developments in a very efficient way. We are hoping that the lessons learnt during this process will be able to be rolled out across government in the future, so it will not be simply green energy approvals that become more efficient and timely but also approvals across government. We understand the imperative need to respond to the challenge of climate change. There are huge opportunities in Western Australia to meet the challenge of climate change; I believe the opportunities are vast and surpass the downsides of that challenge.

I do not want to underestimate in any way the challenge of climate change, but I think we have the capacity to face it in a very realistic way and engage with the opportunities presented by the natural advantages that exist in Western Australia, such as sunlight, wind, vast spaces and natural materials, including critical minerals such as lithium and green hydrogen et cetera. These are huge opportunities for Western Australia and we have the potential to be a green energy superpower in respect of energy exports. This is about making sure we grasp these opportunities with both hands for the benefit of the planet and the benefit of Western Australia and its people. This is a very important investment in the budget and very worthwhile. It will create opportunities for good results for our economy and good environmental outcomes for the planet.

I will refer to the director general, Michelle Andrews, for further comment.

Ms M. Andrews: I thank the member for the question. This initiative was announced in December and will be operating from 1 July. Firstly, it is important to recognise up-front that it is a multi-agency initiative and that the investment is being made into not only the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation but also a number of other agencies. It is quite deliberately being set up as a cross-agency initiative, with the key government agencies that are responsible for the approvals that sit across this emerging industry working together. Secondly, the ambition is high. It is not only about the more efficient approvals process that we know is needed to support the pace of the energy transition required; it is also setting the standards high. This group will be looking at the approval system from the very front end of setting those standards to the environmental assessment process, through to good, well-informed decision-making, and then the insurance framework that needs to be operating in the implementation phase. It is best practice and fit for purpose for what we need around these green energy projects. It was just to frame work already going on. Doors are opening on 1 July. The executive director appointed is Shaun Meredith who is with us today, if the minister would like him to outline.

[4.50 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Given this is such an important aspect in terms of our future possibilities, I invite Mr Meredith to comment further.

Mr S. Meredith: I think a lot of the backgrounding has been given for us. We are definitely in the recruitment phase at the moment, and we are attracting a really good number of applicants. We had more than 500 applications for the positions, which is fantastic, and speaks to the minister’s desire to get some really good quality staff in. We are confident that we will end up in that space.

I had some really early consultation with a lot of key stakeholders, including industry and peak bodies in particular. I invited feedback on their views on how some of those processes might be improved as well. We are in the process of receiving some of that feedback that will help us shape what improvements to those assessment processes will look like moving forward.

We are also working with the government's Streamline WA initiative based in Treasury. It will be doing some regulatory mapping for us, which again will help us and the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation to explain to proponents the pathways for approvals they are required to receive across government. We are very much in that space. Broadly, in terms of an accountability mechanism, we are also reporting through the Council of Financial Regulators back up all the way through to cabinet as well. I think the lights are upon us and expectations are high. As said, we will be opening our doors from 1 July and the intent is to deliver.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Have the personnel to staff come from various departments or just from the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation? From where have they been sourced?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Maybe Mr Meredith can respond to that.

Mr S. Meredith: Currently, there are three of us. In terms of where staff will come from, we are still going through those recruitment processes, but we are certainly attracting a lot of people—some people from outside government and some people previously in government who want to come back to work inside the initiative. We are still finalising those recruitment processes. I will definitely not just be drawing on people from inside the department to staff the green energy approval panel.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I conclude with a question to the minister. Will it be possible to brief me or other members of the opposition on that group and how it will work? It sounds a little complex to take in at the moment. I would like a better understanding of the assurance schemes, for instance, that the minister was talking about and what that means for the projects and the interplay it might have with some current legislation that will also come in on 1 July.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member for his interest. I do not see a problem with that at all; in fact, I would maybe invite government members of Parliament to attend a session as well, because it is an important and exciting initiative. I am happy to provide that briefing.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: My questions were actually answered previously. For clarity for the member for Moore, because he seems to be confused by this, all this information is on page 671 of budget paper No 2. Rather than trying to go into budget paper No 3, all the clean energy approval stuff was there.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That is very good. It is a good explanation on budget paper No 3.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I have a question on page 147 budget paper No 3 about the resourcing of the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation. It states —

A grant of \$387,000 will be provided ... to employ additional staff to manage media and communications activities.

Why is the government funding the communication activities of this corporation?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The member may be aware that Aboriginal body corporates have a lot of demands on them, and often have limited resources and huge administrative asks of them. They often interact with government and private companies on a range of community interests. It is not unusual that government would help resource these body corporates. Indeed, national park creation, the subject of the next division, comes with resourcing for Aboriginal body corporates to be able to operate and sustain themselves.

In terms of the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, the member would understand that there has been intense interest and activity on the Burrup Peninsula. There is a program to protect the sacred rock art on the Burrup. There are a lot of demands and requests on the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation up there, and there is a lot of intense interest in the broader community. This funding is an investment over two years to help the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation deal with the volume of interests it has and the issues it is connected to, such as community engagement. From the media alone, it relates to the number of calls it is dealing with. We saw it to be appropriate to provide that support to a very important Aboriginal corporation dealing with an important part of Western Australia and some really large issues. There is Aboriginal rock art monitoring, World Heritage listings and a lot of other issues that it is dealing with at the moment.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Who devised the grant and was it a competitive process?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: This was not a grant situation. It related to partnership funding that had already been provided to the organisation. It was additional money to the partnership funding already agreed to.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The minister is saying that it is not a grant situation, but the wording of the paragraph is that "a grant" of \$387 000 will be provided.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I think for budget purposes, that was the wording offered as "a grant" of funding, but it is not to be taken in terms of what the member might also consider to be an open grant situation with an invitation for community groups. This was a specific organisation with an issue. It already had partnership funding, and so it was seen to be appropriate to increase that amount of money.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Why have no other grants been given to other Aboriginal corporations in this regard?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: They are, member. As I explained in my response earlier, there is often funding to Aboriginal organisations. This was a specific issue relating to this Aboriginal corporation that was dealing with a whole host of issues, and still is, at the centre of the Burrup. The member knows there is some contention there about rock art, rock art monitoring and the listing of World Heritage sites. They are at the pointy end of a lot of things at the moment. This is a unique situation. Therefore, it was seen as appropriate to increase funding under the partnership agreement. Money is often made available to other organisations, Aboriginal body corporates, to help them co-manage national parks, for instance.

[5.00 pm]

Mr S.N. AUBREY: I refer to page 670, budget paper 2, volume 2, and the line item “Climate Action Fund—Climate Adaptation”. Climate adaptation is a significant issue and I ask: how is the government building a climate-resilient Western Australia?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The question relates to climate resilience, which is very important because although we are doing everything we can to reduce emissions, and the state government has its own ambitions around that as an entity in the broader economy, we have to face the fact that there are already consequences of a warming planet. We see this with the flooding that we saw in the Kimberley earlier this year that was described as a one-in-100-year event. We have seen more intense and longer bushfire seasons. We have seen cyclones—cyclone Seroja in our midwest, for instance, coming down the coast in an area in which it is very rare to have cyclonic activity. We know that there will be an ongoing need to make our state more resilient. We are looking at the impact on Western Australia a number of ways in terms of modelling and investment, and predictions of temperature and sea level rises and other important areas such as erosion of the coast. Western Australia is a very large place with a very large coastline. We know that some communities have already been impacted by coastal erosion. The member for Scarborough may know, and other members here are very aware of that. These issues need to be considered.

We also need to consider the resilience of the state and its operations. A 50-year-old bridge in Fitzroy Crossing was washed away; it was incredible that the power of a flood could do that. This is also about making our infrastructure more resilient. It is an issue for the Minister for Transport, but I know the new bridge in Fitzroy Crossing will be much higher and longer and more robust and resilient against what might occur in the future. It involves considering how we ensure that our hospitals and police and schools are maintained in the future, and the resilience of all sorts of systems, services and infrastructure that we provide as a state.

Each agency must look at itself and how it might be exposed to the impacts of climate change. It is a big piece of work that involves not only the government’s own operations, but also the resilience of industry sectors such as agriculture. A lot of work and studies and modelling have been done. We are using the Pawsey supercomputer to do the most intense modelling of what the climate will do in the future up to 75 years from now. It is exciting work that needs to be done as part of our responsibilities under climate action.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Are you the minister to ask about the native vegetation policy?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Very good. I wanted to be sure.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I was trying to remember which division we are in, but it is me!

Mr R.S. LOVE: I note that an allocation was made in the asset investment program for the native vegetation extent mapping of \$2.1 million or \$2 million.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: What page?

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is on page 672, which refers to asset investment, and contains a discussion on native vegetation policy for Western Australia with a few dot points outlining actions. Paragraph 20 reads —

... the Government committed funding to support the first two years of implementation of the Native Vegetation Policy.

Could the minister point to where that has provided benefit? What has been achieved with that? Is that only the native vegetation extent mapping? There are no real figures on it; it just says the minister has committed funding to support it.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: To make sure we preserve and increase native vegetation in Western Australia, some baselining is needed to ascertain the extent of native vegetation. That is where the WA vegetation extent mapping system, known as WAVE, comes in. The funding relates to that three-year program. There have been huge advances in the past decade or so in intelligence-based ecosystem mapping. Through this pilot, we will test and develop how technology can be efficiently and robustly applied across our large and diverse state. This will inform the design

of the future WAVE as an efficient single source of truth and a publicly accessible dataset to track our progress toward a net gain in native vegetation. A future system will support informed decisions and policymaking by multiple state agencies.

To sum it up, a body of work is being done to use the latest technology to work out a system by which we accurately map the type and amount of vegetation across Western Australia. I guess that involves satellites and computers to do that work.

Mr R.S. LOVE: One can look at a satellite at any stage and see the types of vegetation present. The Department of Lands had a program some time ago that mapped the condition of rangelands and lands within its remit. What does this add to the knowledge base that already exists?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: To get into detail, I refer this to Anya Lam, the senior manager of the native vegetation strategy.

Ms A. Lam: I thank the minister. The difference between the mapping that exists within the state and the new investment is that the mapping dataset previously used to track the extent of native vegetation across the whole of Western Australia has ceased. That was done by the former Department of Agriculture and Food, and then the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development through until 2020; it has now ceased. There are new technologies available to map the full extent of native vegetation across the whole state in a more cost-effective way than the former manual visual assessment. There was an operator who would visually look at imagery and draw lines and boundaries around the vegetation. Techniques are being used in other jurisdictions now that leverage satellite imagery and artificial intelligence to make the first part of that job easier. The difference between this mapping and other types of mapping datasets that exist to track vegetation across the state is that the pastoral land condition mapping that is done by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development is done only for a particular area and for pastoral land condition and not for native vegetation.

[5.10 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: Would the mapping be of sufficient quality to assist in making assessments of carbon levels in areas such as rangelands or does further on-ground assessment have to take place to establish that?

Ms A. Lam: The initial datasets that will be produced from that pilot—it is a pilot prior to seeking full funding for the system into the future—will not support better assessments of carbon. However, they will move the state forward to being able to improve how we assess carbon. The national carbon accounting system is most accurate for tracking the carbon in vegetation in wooded areas, so forest areas that predominate in the eastern states. There is work to be done to improve how algorithms are used to track the carbon in vegetation in drier parts of Australia, such as the rangelands in WA. The technology and methods we develop in this system will help progress our ability to track that.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Further to that, is the department or anybody in government doing the work the adviser just spoke of to further develop the tool?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As the director general explained, a lot of work is still being done within government. I think the policy work needed to work out the linkages between carbon offsets and biodiversity offsets goes across all jurisdictions. The answer is that the policy has to happen first, and then the tools to deliver on that policy come second. The other thing I would say is that this is emerging technology. It is a place the state needs to be in because we know that new technology is developing all the time that increases the opportunities and the ability to work out the extent of native vegetation. As the member points out, it is valuable, and once there is a baseline, we can work out what improvements there have been and then there is opportunity to get involved in the carbon market and, obviously, the federal government talks about biodiversity credit opportunities as well. The opportunity for Western Australia, having such a huge landmass, is that eventually revenue streams will come from carbon offsetting and there will be an ability to sequester carbon in the natural environment, but also increase the habitat and biodiversity credit. It is exciting and there is real potential there. It is an area we need to be in and we need to invest in the science well.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Is that system also used to look at changes in the urban tree canopy?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: As it is still being developed, I will get Ms Lam to comment on that initially, and I would be happy to add some comments as well.

Ms A. Lam: In the urban areas in Perth and Peel the most accurate tool to use at this point is Urban Monitor. That system uses high-resolution photography to track canopy in the Perth and Peel regions. It would be too expensive to use that methodology across the whole state.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 669 of budget paper No 2, and the net amount appropriated to deliver services. Why is the department's total funding set to drop by more than \$30 million by 2026–27?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will ask Ms Manderson to respond to that.

Ms H. Manderson: I refer the member to page 685, the details of controlled grants and subsidies. The department delivers a substantial grant program and at the moment that tails away towards the end of the forward estimate years. A large number of grants in the early years fall away. That is the primary reason for the change in funding.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I return to the topic of trees and refer to page 679 and the explanation of significant movements. Paragraph 1 discusses the commencement of the urban greening grants program. The minister may recall that in 2018, I think it was, CSIRO published a detailed study on the changes in the urban tree canopy in Perth. As I recollect, 60 000 hectares of tree canopy was lost in a decade. When I look at new housing developments near the minister's electorate, to the north of Armadale Road as one leaves the freeway, heading east, I cannot comprehend how it would be possible to plant a blade of grass because the suburbs cover every possible square inch of soil. Is the department developing a strategy to at least retain the tree canopy? Have any measurements been taken post the CSIRO study on that? Perhaps that is two questions, chair.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will take the first question first, and come back to the other. The member is right. There is a massive challenge in Perth. Over many, many years not enough attention has been paid to urban vegetation, particularly native vegetation. We are ranked very low down the list for tree canopy for Australian capitals. There are a couple of stories to tell about my electorate. One can drive down the freeway and look to the west and see a sea of roofs.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Shimmering roofs.

[5.20 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Shimmering roofs. That is a testament to some of the development that has gone on in that area in the past 15 to 20 years, and later.

It is another story in Wellard, in the electorate of Baldavis, and it is one I often point to because it is a 15-year-old suburb. The developer there took a different approach and left many mature gum trees. There are roads that suddenly fork into two because there is a giant stand of jarrah or karri in the way. Some lots are missing homes because there are good, mature gum trees on them. It is possible to have better urban design and it is something I raise with my colleagues and a matter I am pursuing vigorously.

This budget delivers a new initiative—the urban greening grants—which I am very passionate about. It will be carried out in collaboration with local government and the folks down at Murdoch University, who are very keen to see native species re-established in our metropolitan area. I am very keen to increase our tree canopy. It is something that can be achieved in cooperation with local government. It has resources for planting and doing maintenance. We can assist them. Any grants can be leveraged to a higher value with that contribution from local government. I think communities want it.

We had a protest out the front of Parliament House yesterday about black cockatoos. We know that they rely on native species. The more we can plant in our suburbs will be a good thing. We also have the ability to map our metropolitan area and work out strategically where those trees need to be to link up with wildlife corridors. This is just one aspect of an issue that is so important. We need a greener community. It is very important for the environment, threatened species and a whole range of species. It is also good for the climate. Having shady streets and environments reduces our reliance on air conditioners in our homes. It is also good for mental health to have the natural environment around us, and it results in people using less water and a lot of other resources. This initiative in the budget is important. It is a two-year program, not a four-year program. The intent is to roll it out and see how we can appraise the program after two years and see where we go after that in our ambition for an urban canopy.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I think there are some excellent examples. I thought the original Ellenbrook subdivision was probably environmentally a better outcome than when it was horse paddocks. It has worked superbly, so well done. Is the minister's department working with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage on this issue? It strikes me that there is almost a conflict. I appreciate the minister's good intentions. I know that people generally think the tree canopy is important. I agree that this is generational, not one government, but there are ongoing planning decisions that leave no room for any trees in substantial areas because of the way the areas are designed. Is part of the work of the minister's department to work with the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, or is the minister aware of other government initiatives that are dealing with the matter of an urban tree canopy?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I have a collaborative approach with my colleague the planning minister. This issue is recognised by all government agencies. There are opportunities to work together. I do not want to speak outside of my portfolio responsibilities but I do know from the planning minister that new urban design codes provide for greater green space. The effort is to allow innovative design that has actual large trees planted rather than in pots on a home site. Some of the changes to urban design are deliberately intended to provide for more urban canopy. That is the responsibility of home owners. Others also have a responsibility, such as local governments, and even

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other government agencies, such as with schools that have lots of space. Many schools are well timbered but there is an opportunity for plantations of native plants on the edge of ovals, whether they are school ovals or in community parks. There is a great opportunity there. It is an issue that I have raised with my colleague the Minister for Education.

The appropriation was recommended.