

## URBAN GREENING AND CANOPY COVER

### *Statement*

**HON DR BRAD PETTITT (South Metropolitan)** [6.38 pm]: I rise tonight to make a statement about urban greening and canopy cover. Last week, the Western Australian Local Government Association held a sold-out conference on this subject at Curtin University. I also want to say congratulations to WALGA for holding this conference. The fact that it was sold out and there was an amazing array of speakers is a real credit to WALGA and to this issue. I hope that this subject is something that, in many ways, we can all agree on, across all sides of this chamber. I do not think that anyone disagrees with the idea of having more trees around to make our cities better.

Members might not be aware that Perth is the capital city with the least canopy cover in Australia. That is not a political thing. It goes back a long way. To give members a bit of a summary, the 2017 report *Where should all the trees go?* was on vegetation going back to between 2009 and 2016. It showed that 41 per cent of local governments had experienced significant tree loss across Perth. More recently since then, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage has developed a dashboard to track urban tree cover. It has kind of stayed at that low level from 2016 onwards. We have not seen much growth. Local governments and a range of other groups have started to really make an effort in how they can improve that coverage, but despite this, the levels have stayed flat. There are good reasons for that. Certainly part of the problem, I think we would all agree, is infill. Canopy cover on private land is diminishing. The standard Perth models of infill are battleaxe, quadruplex or triplex blocks, which have wiped out huge amounts of canopy cover on private land. The broader problem is that, as we push out to our newer suburbs on the urban fringe, they are often designed pretty much as sandpits because almost all vegetation is cleared and there is very little canopy cover when they are built. The reality is that we have the rich and the poor in canopy cover across our suburbs. Some of the inner-city suburbs are doing pretty well. They have invested in canopy cover but, as a whole, Perth is doing quite badly. Nearmap, an amazing online resource, has mapped canopy cover across the country. It was really interesting to see how Perth can compare. It looks at the percentages in each capital city across Australia where the population is living in what are called “leafy suburbs”—suburbs with more than 20 per cent canopy cover, which is what the minimum should be. In Perth, interestingly only 22 per cent of suburbs met the criteria, which was the lowest of all capital cities. There was a real range from Melbourne at 30 per cent, Sydney at 44 per cent and Brisbane as high as 79 per cent. Perth was sitting way down and I think we can all agree that a huge amount could be done.

It is an interesting issue because it sits on both public land—in parks and streets—and also private land, so there are different solutions. One of the speakers at the conference from the City of Sydney had mapped out what they have been doing to increase the canopy cover. It was extraordinary to see that turn around in recent years. There are good reasons for doing this. I will not go into details but I will give a couple of quick ones. Of course, there is the heat island effect. We all know that it is hotter where there are no trees. In fact, a recent report shows a place in the shade with good tree cover on a hot day is six degrees cooler than those areas that are not. That is the air temperature. The surface temperature can change by 19 degrees, which is pretty extraordinary if you think about it. In some areas, it can be 40 degrees in the shade and almost 60 degrees in full sun. This creates very different kinds of neighbourhoods. This was quantified as a \$17 000 difference per household for equal houses if one has trees along the street and the other does not. There are really good reasons to plant trees and get them in across our suburbs. I assume we all agree with this.

At the conference, as I said, there was a range of really good speakers, including Professor Josh Byrne from Sydney and Hon Reece Whitby, MLA, Minister for Climate Action; Environment. He said some really good things. To paraphrase, he acknowledged that the Swan coastal plain had a terrible record on species loss and that there were good reasons, including positive social and economic benefits, for planting and that we needed to do better. I came away from this thinking that everybody agrees and, if everybody agrees, why are we not doing it? The Western Australian Local Government Association has previously called for the expansion of the urban canopy grant program, which it said was really important. Interestingly, the state infrastructure strategy, which came out in the middle of last year, said something similar. In fact, one of its key recommendations—recommendation 18 if members want to look it up—included to expand the urban canopy grant program. It also recommended setting up some good governance around that with a lead agency, measurable targets and all those rational things. The state infrastructure strategy suggests a really important role around funding this. I do not know whether anyone has read the strategy and the state government’s recent response to the strategy, but this is where it gets confusing and disappointing for me. The minister said good things. The state infrastructure strategy says good things. WALGA said good things. They are all saying to increase our urban tree canopy program. The government’s response to that was only about a week ago. It was put out on a Friday afternoon with not much publicity. It basically said it partially supports the strategy. To give members the detail, I quote —

As part of considering priorities for climate adaptation, the WA Government will assess the merit of a State-level urban forest program.

The broad summary is that the government might do something down the track. It only partially supports the recommendation. I want to put out there a sense of why. When every expert, the state's own infrastructure strategy, the minister and everyone else is saying we need to do this to make our suburbs more liveable, why is it not happening? I find that frustrating and confusing.

Of course, the urban canopy grant program is the bit that runs on public land. There is a separate plan that runs on private land, which is equally frustrating. Local governments want to protect trees on private land but are not able to do so. To give members an example, the City of South Perth tried to implement this recently, but the WAPC refused to even advertise that change to its local planning scheme, although it is letting the City of Nedlands advertise its bit. David Caddy, the head of the Western Australian Planning Commission, recently said that the local government approach could be to individually change their schemes. Surely that is not the way we want to create tree canopy in this state—by each individual local government needing to change its scheme. Surely there is a role for the state to step up and create some consistency. That is what we are trying to do across the rest of our planning processes. It is a mystery to me why, for urban tree canopy, we would leave it to individual local governments.

There are really important reasons to increase the urban tree canopy. It is such a good opportunity. It needs a plan, it needs a lead agency and it needs funding. Local governments cannot do it alone. I think this is a wonderful opportunity for the state and local governments to partner. I came away from the WALGA conference hearing that local governments are ready to partner. They are already funding tree canopy plans. They are already doing their bit around changing their planning schemes. The missing bit—why Western Australia is not going forward and it is not happening—is that the state government is currently missing at the table. It is a pretty simple thing and a really great opportunity for us to step up and do that.