

FLIGHT AVAILABILITY — GERALDTON

Grievance

MS L. DALTON (Geraldton) [10.02 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Transport. I thank the minister for taking my grievance. Today, I rise on behalf of Geraldton constituents to talk about the lack of flight services into and out of our regional city.

For many people living in regional WA, trips to Perth are a fact of life, whether they be for a special occasion, to visit family and friends or to attend medical and specialist appointments. Often, they are for business or work commitments; indeed, I regularly travel to Perth by road to attend Parliament. Sometimes due to the circumstances of our trips to Perth, road travel is not an option, and the quickest and most convenient way is by plane. That is why air travel is an important service for residents in my electorate and the midwest—less time on the road and more time at the destination. Aviation is essential to the liveability of Geraldton, the social and health needs of regional people and the economic health and growth of our business, including tourism.

The City of Greater Geraldton is the third-largest city in Western Australia and the largest city north of Perth, with a population of more than 38 000. It services the wider midwest, which has a total population of around 55 000, and is the primary gateway to the midwest region and offshore islands.

The McGowan Labor government's regional airfare cap has made air travel more affordable for Geraldton and midwest residents. Residents can now fly to Perth for just \$199 one way. The airfare cap has been quite popular across WA. However, the uptake has been much lower in Geraldton, which is disappointing but not a surprise. The main reason that constituents in my electorate have given for not taking up regional capped fares is the inconsistency of flights and the all-too-regular cancellations but, mostly, it is because of the inadequate flight schedule.

Since the departure of Virgin Australia from this route in 2019, only Qantas has offered flights on the Perth–Geraldton route. In June 2022, Qantas decided to cancel a number of flights across regional WA. Geraldton felt the brunt of that decision with many of the cancelled services on the Geraldton–Perth route. Qantas announced this as a temporary measure to bring certainty to customers, because flights had been cancelled or delayed at the last minute, which Qantas said had been due to staffing issues. In August 2022, Qantas announced an additional eight flight cancellations.

To offset the decline in daily flights, Qantas introduced a larger A320 aircraft on the route to accommodate more people on the days that flights are scheduled, but that has not meaningfully addressed the issue of the reduction in weekly flights. Reduced capacity has also been related to the significant increase in airfares. For example, on Sunday, 23 October 2022, the best available Qantas airfare from Perth–Geraldton on Monday, 24 October was \$566 one way. The scheduled change from two flights a day to one was advertised as taking effect from August to 9 September 2022. It is now October and Qantas' flight schedule is mostly unchanged, with return flight capability on Mondays and Fridays, one daily flight at midday from Tuesday to Thursday, an early morning flight on Saturdays and an afternoon flight on Sundays. This was supposed to be a temporary measure until the end of October, but Qantas has now advised that it will be extended to March 2023. Although the weekend schedule is attractive to people travelling to Perth and beyond for leisure, the weekday flights in the middle of the day do not suit the schedule of visiting specialists, businesspeople and government department staff. This puts Geraldton and the midwest at a major disadvantage.

I recently met with representatives from Qantas and raised the community's concerns and disappointment with the current situation. I told them that the limited flight schedule, the cancellation of flights and flight departure delays are having a detrimental effect on my community. People are unable to attend medical appointments in Perth and businesspeople have to drive down and back in a day or incur the added cost of staying overnight. Visiting specialists are unable to come to Geraldton as regularly as they have in the past and the risk of losing them altogether is real. The impact on our tourism market is also real, just when we are marketing the beautiful Abrolhos Islands, the Kalbarri Skywalk and the Beresford foreshore to the rest of Australia and the world. Local GP networks, the Country Women's Association of WA, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia and the City of Greater Geraldton have all been raising these issues with me and Qantas. I suggested to Qantas that if it could not see daily return flights resuming in the near future, could it please consider at least moving the one daily flight from the middle of the day to the morning so that people travelling either to Perth or Geraldton would at least have the day to conduct their business. They could stay overnight, but they could get the morning flight home. That is a reasonable solution.

As I have already expressed, Geraldton is a major regional centre and a gateway to the midwest, and we deserve better. I understand that Geraldton is not alone and that Qantas has reduced services across WA regional ports, similar to Geraldton. However, given the relatively low frequency of services into Geraldton, the impact on Geraldton is disproportionate. For example, the reduction of services into Karratha—there are more than 30 services per week—has had less of an impact. Additionally, Virgin also operates into Karratha.

My community is not ignorant to the challenges that many businesses face in the post-pandemic world and it understands that staffing issues have disrupted flight services for many destinations across Australia. However, as

the member for Geraldton, it is my job to advocate for the people in my electorate and, in all seriousness, it just is not good enough. Qantas has had plenty of time to prepare for the return of regular flights. As we know, it put a lot of pressure on our government to open the border and return to life as normal during the height of the pandemic. Surely that goes for Qantas, too!

We in Geraldton are being let down by Qantas, which recently made a \$1.3 billion profit. With only one carrier coming in and out of Geraldton, it certainly feels like we are completely beholden to its business decisions, which look to completely favour the shareholders, not its customers. Can the minister please advise what steps are being taken to address this issue?

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [10.10 am]: I thank the member for Geraldton for her very passionate grievance. I want to acknowledge her work representing the community of Geraldton, which is upset and angry about what has happened with the flights.

I want to start by talking more generally about our government's support for intrastate aviation. As we have always said, accessibility and affordability of flights is our number one priority. That is why we continue to support new routes within Western Australia, including the extension of the Broome–Derby flights and the introduction of Aviair's Karratha–Geraldton flights. We are very keen to continue to support affordability and accessibility. In relation to accessibility, we introduced the regional airfare zone cap this year. The member for Geraldton is right; there has been a lot of support for that scheme around the state. I am happy to report that 17 116 regional airfare zone cap fares were used by regional residents in July and August this year. We had good numbers in Geraldton—186 in July and 257 in August. We know that they were probably a little restricted because of the lack of availability. We want to continue to encourage aviation in Western Australia. As I said, we are tackling affordability with Australia's first regional airfare zone cap for regional residents and by supporting airlines throughout Western Australia.

The Department of Transport and I constantly engage with airlines to determine how we can support the growth of new flights, looking at which markets need regulation and which markets should be deregulated. Flights to and from Geraldton were regulated. In 2011, they were deregulated. Unfortunately, in 2019, Virgin Australia pulled out. We were left with Qantas, which was offering 12 weekly return services. It cut that down to seven services and now it is back to nine services. As the member for Geraldton said, the disproportionate impact in Geraldton because of the lack of competition with only one airline and the lack of services is being felt.

I have asked the Department of Transport to look at all options. We are engaging with the City of Greater Geraldton. There is a reluctance to go back to regulation because of the lack of competition. I will be taking up the issue of flight availability with Qantas. We will also look at other levers and options to try to support more flights to Geraldton. We want more people to be able to access Geraldton by air. We want Geraldton residents to have greater accessibility to flights so that they can see loved ones and attend medical appointments. From a government perspective, we also want to ensure that we can fly public servants and government representatives in and out. There is a whole list of reasons for wanting more availability. The transition back to normality for air travel across the state is happening, but we cannot leave people in Geraldton with the current number of services. That is why we are working to do all we can, both at an official level and also through Qantas, to try to get more air services restored.

I thank the member for Geraldton for her grievance. She has been talking to me about what we can do. As I said, we will look at all the options—I will not list them—so that we can support more services and make sure that more people in Geraldton have access to our new community fare and more people in Perth can access Geraldton by air. I thank the member for her grievance. We will work together to see what further flights we can secure.