



27 April 2012

Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC
Parliament of Western Australia
Member for South West Region
Shadow Minister for Environment;
Climate Change; Lands; Youth; Peel

Hon Brian Ellis MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

Dear Mr Ellis

You wrote to me recently with regard to Petition 151 tabled by me in the Legislative Council about the closure of the Denmark Centre for Sustainable Living (CSL).

I understand that the Committee is holding a hearing on 2 May 2012 to examine the matters canvassed in the petition. I submit for the Committee's consideration the following observations outlining my views on the issues that gave rise to the petition.

From the outset let me make it clear that the outcome towards which I believe we should all be working is one which satisfies both Denmark High School and the CSL.

In trying to bring about some reconciliation of the objectives of both the school and the CSL it is important to note that the buildings which currently house the CSL were due to be demolished by the Department of Education in 2000 when they were reclaimed by the community and restored using voluntary labour, donations of materials and expertise and grant monies to open as the CSL in 2004.

While there have clearly been some extremely unfortunate oversights on the part of people connected with the CSL in relation to the management of the lease between the Department and the CSL, there is no disagreement about the fact that a period of 15 years was originally negotiated as the lease term, with periodic renewals during that time.

As the letter delivered to the CSL in October 2011 makes clear, it is currently the Department's intention that the CSL buildings are to be vacated by 30 June 2012. No shared use of the buildings has been proposed, and no alternative accommodation of the CSL's activities or compensation for the loss of the buildings have been offered.

Sadly, since the delivery of the Department's letter ordering the vacation of the CSL, relationships have become quite strained. People connected with the CSL tell me that they felt very shocked by the letter and by what they perceived to be a complete breakdown of the relationships between those who had prior warning that the lease conditions had been breached and those who were not aware. From the Department's point of view, things appear to be quite clear-cut. With no lease in place, there is no impediment to the school acquiring full use of the CSL buildings, which the school will presumably use to assist with the various logistical difficulties associated with making the improvements to the school's facilities.

What is important here, it seems to me, is to consider whether the broader community of Denmark will benefit if the CSL is closed down. There can be no doubt that the planned improvements to the school facilities are very welcome and eagerly awaited. I think that the loss of the CSL, however, will place a burden on the community in two particular ways.

First, the CSL is a highly valued practical resource for both Denmark residents and visitors to the region. Over the course of an average year, the CSL has been accommodating 5000 students, more than 600 of whom come for residential courses, as well as managing over 300 bookings for meeting rooms and 20 reservations for whole day events. It houses environmental workshops, expos and conferences, art exhibitions, the Gondwana Youth Arts program, counselling services and many local community groups and provides commercial kitchen hire and facilities for training, employment and volunteer programs. It is regarded as a valuable resource for field study programs run by several major tertiary institutions in Perth and provides a base for the various NRM projects located in the area surrounding Denmark.

Second, the Denmark community has a very significant investment in the CSL. This investment has a financial aspect, with more than \$1million being spent on the refurbishment of the CSL which now operates as a practical demonstration of the principles of sustainability with its own onsite sewage and waste water management system, passive and active solar heating, hot water and electricity generation and a constructed wetland. Perhaps more importantly, the investment is emotional. The community is proud of the way the building housing the CSL was rescued from demolition and restored to a point where, largely through the efforts of volunteers, it has gained international recognition as a place where the principles of sustainability are put into action. It was in recognition of the hard work that went into this rebuilding that the CSL was a Western Australian Environment Award winner in 2010. What that award acknowledges is that when people work together the result is a sustainable community with all the economic, social and environmental benefits that sustainability entails.

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