

House: Legislative Assembly- Grievance
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Member: Simpson, Mr Tony; McGowan, Mr Mark
Subject: REGIONAL RESOURCE RECOVERY CENTRE
Page: 8770b - 8772a / 1



[PDF of this document.](#)

REGIONAL RESOURCE RECOVERY CENTRE

Grievance

MR A.J. SIMPSON (Serpentine-Jarrahdale) [9.27 am]: My grievance is directed towards the Minister for the Environment and concerns the Regional Resource Recovery Centre in Canning Vale, which is under the jurisdiction of the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council. My office has been contacted by several constituents regarding the noxious odour coming from this facility. These individuals do not live in Canning Vale; some live as far as five kilometres away in Willetton and Leeming. These individuals claim that not only has the odour stopped them from enjoying the use of their properties, but it has also affected their health. However, when they approached their local and state government representatives, they were fobbed off. Some of these individuals are constituents of the member for Riverton. They saw the member several times, yet apparently he has done little to help them. They also took the matter to the Minister for the Environment and the Premier's office, but so far no one has been forthcoming to help them. Instead, all they have experienced is buck passing and vague promises of action, none of which materialise. I wrote to the Minister for the Environment on 1 September to outline my concerns with this facility. So far he has not replied. My office contacted his correspondence officer two weeks ago and asked whether the reply would be coming soon. We were told that the policy officer was working on the issue and would get back to us. So far nothing has come forward.

This is a serious issue that may involve a health risk to many people. The Minister for the Environment does not seem to take it seriously. I have heard a few complaints relating to the Canning Vale RRRC. These include the fact that the buffer zone around the facility is inadequate. I have been told that the design on which the facility is based calls for a one-kilometre buffer between the facility and residential or commercial zones. The current buffer is approximately 400 metres. Secondly, the facility is not kept at negative pressure. Having the facility at negative pressure involves constantly sucking all the air out of the facility and passing this air through filters before pumping it back in.

Mr A.D. McRae: I think you should see the facility.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order, minister!

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I have been informed that the ventilation and air-filtering systems in the Canning Vale Regional Resource Recovery Centre are not adequate and do not keep the facility at negative pressure. I understand that the South Metropolitan Regional Council is providing \$2.4 million to fix these problems. However, I have also been informed that this is a bandaid solution at best and will not fix the worst of the problems. My office has spoken to the chief executive officer of the South Metropolitan Regional Council, Stuart McAll, who has been very helpful. I have organised a tour of the facility with a few of my Liberal colleagues. The SMRC is not the issue here. The problem, as I see it, is that the Minister for the Environment and the government in general have not taken this issue seriously enough. It is the responsibility of the state government to protect the environment of our state and to protect the quality of the air we breathe.

At the risk of repeating myself, the allegations I have heard are serious, in the sense that they involve possible health risks. In fact, the allegations that I have heard, if true, could possibly involve a breach of the Environmental Protection Act by the operators. In particular, division 1, section 49, may have been breached. For those who have not read it, it states -

- (4) A person who intentionally or with criminal negligence -
- (a) emits an unreasonable emission from any premises; or
 - (b) causes an unreasonable emission to be emitted from any premises,
- commits an offence.

On 12 September this year I asked the minister in a question on notice whether the air quality of the suburbs near the RRRC had been tested. Twelve days later the minister replied that it had not but that it might possibly be tested next year. He could not give me specifics. That is not good enough. The Minister for the Environment has been contacted by several people who live and work in the suburbs near the RRRC, and so far the minister has done little or nothing about the issue. In his careless attitude towards this situation, the minister is potentially endangering the lives of those affected.

Mr A.D. McRae: Did you say “endangering lives”?

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I said that the minister is potentially endangering the lives of those affected.

I do not know whether this facility poses an actual health risk. Perhaps that is the problem. The government has not eased the concerns of residents who fear for their health and are having their quality of life affected by the smell from this facility. However, the fact that these people felt they were being ignored by their member of Parliament and the relevant ministers is sad, and it is potentially negligence by this government.

The minister has still not responded to my concerns some two and a half months after I wrote to him. How can the minister justify his lack of action?

MR M. McGOWAN (Rockingham - Minister for the Environment) [9.35 am]: It is customary in this place that members do not read their speeches; in fact, the standing orders require it. The member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale might like to take that into account and make a speech without reading it. I may take points of order in future. The member for Serpentine-Jarrahdale might like to think about that.

Secondly, members should not come into this place making political attacks and saying that people’s lives are threatened when they have absolutely no evidence to support that. Such an attack is an outrageous slur. It is disgraceful and disgusting to come into this chamber and say that. I thought the member was a better person. I thought he would not be running around the place saying that the actions of the government were threatening people’s lives, without any substantiation whatsoever other than a note that somebody has obviously written for him.

I want first to make it plain that the member for Riverton has made representations to me on a number of occasions about this matter. He has been incredibly diligent in taking up the concerns of local residents. He has met with local residents and been to the facility. He has told me on a number of occasions about the problem. This government did not put the facility there. It did not allocate the land for the facility. As I understand it, the then Court Liberal government approved it in 2000. If the member wants to complain about people’s lives being threatened by a decision of government, perhaps he should talk to his colleagues, including the former Minister for Local Government who is now the Leader of the Opposition. The member might like to think about that when he makes those sorts of claims in this chamber.

The member obviously does not understand how waste facilities are run in this state. This is a local government facility. A number of local governments in the South Metropolitan Region got together to run the facility. I have a great deal of sympathy and understanding for the people who have been impacted by this facility. My office has been very diligent in taking up their complaints. The member has attacked public servants who do not have the opportunity to come into this house and defend themselves. That is out of character for him. If I were him, I would think about that before I did it. The member has obviously had his speech written for him, probably by one of the attack dogs in the office of the Leader of the Opposition, and he decided to come into this chamber to read it. He should not do that in future because he has done himself a great disservice.

I have sympathy with local residents who have issues with the odours from that facility. The department is

working very diligently to make sure that those complaints are resolved. I will go over what we have done in a moment. Let me say at the outset that I have not been to this facility but I have been to one in Sydney that performs the same sort of function. The facility was built and operated by a company called GHD, which has on its board Hon Richard Court. He was the last Liberal Premier; in fact, he was the best Liberal member I have seen in this place. He is on the board of that company because he knows that these facilities are worthwhile when trying to ensure greater reuse of waste products. I would have thought that principle was good. The compost the facility produces does not result in harmful impacts on rivers and wetlands.

The member raised the question of the actions that the department has taken. The department has examined the source of the odour and found it to be the composting processes. There is a problem with a leak of air from that facility. The facility is supposed to be completely under negative air pressure and the biofilters are supposed to remove organic odours. However, they have not worked as well as they should have. We undertook an investigation and engaged consultants to determine the cause of the odours. The consultants came up with that reason in 2006. The latest finding is that the required works will not be completed until January of next year, which is a little over a month and a half away. The odour levels have significantly improved; in fact, we have surveyed local residents who confirmed that. The South Metropolitan Regional Council has budgeted \$2.4 million to complete the necessary repairs. The regional council is submitting weekly updates to the Department of Environment and Conservation. The biofilter equipment at the facility has been replaced. The biofilters are now working effectively. There has been a significant reduction in the number of complaints. We have been undertaking air-quality testing in conjunction with the Chemistry Centre (WA). The Department of Health is assisting us with that. We have tried to work with the facility and local governments to improve the outcomes, because the advice I have received is that if we were simply to close the facility outright, the problem could become worse. We have therefore tried to work through the problem and get the best outcome for local residents. If this problem is not fixed, the department has advised me that it will consider enforcement. I obviously do not direct those sorts of actions. It would not be appropriate for me to do so.

Mr A.D. McRae: I am continuing to facilitate meetings between the community action group and the Department of Environment and Conservation to assist that process.

Mr M. McGOWAN: That is exactly right. The member for Riverton is taking up complaints all the time with the department and me, as any diligent local member would. We have known about the problem for a while and we have been taking action while the opposition has been unaware of it. We expect the problem to be resolved in January.