

**SOUTH METROPOLITAN REGIONAL COUNCIL'S
REGIONAL RESOURCE RECOVERY CENTRE - ODOUR EMISSIONS**

Urgency Motion

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths): I have received the following letter -

Dear Mr President

I hereby give notice that pursuant to Standing Order 72 I intend to move today:

“That this House consider as a matter of urgency the ongoing complaints of excessive odour emission from the South Metropolitan Regional Council’s Regional Resource Recovery Centre at Canning Vale and the effectiveness of the State Government’s efforts to resolve the issue.”

The member will require the support of four members in order to move the motion.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [3.39 pm]: I move -

That this house consider as a matter of urgency the ongoing complaints of excessive odour emission from the South Metropolitan Regional Council’s Regional Resource Recovery Centre at Canning Vale and the effectiveness of the state government’s efforts to resolve the issue.

The South Metropolitan Regional Council was created as a regional local government on 30 October 1991. Under the Local Government Act 1995, it continued to function as a regional local government. The member councils of the SMRC are the City of Canning, the City of Cockburn, the Town of East Fremantle, the City of Fremantle, the Town of Kwinana, the City of Melville and the City of Rockingham. In 2000, after a long period of study and consultation, five of those member councils - Canning, Cockburn, East Fremantle, Fremantle and Melville - adopted a regional waste management strategy. The reason for the development of that strategy was explained to me a few years earlier when I was a very new member of this place. The study of the regional council had shown that the south metropolitan region was headed for something of a crisis in waste disposal and waste management, that landfill sites would be filled to capacity and that there would be great difficulty in identifying and establishing further waste disposal mechanisms by way of landfill. These conditions were made worse by, for example, the need for waste to be transported excessive distances if it was to move beyond the boundaries of the local governments involved. In addition, there was also a rightful concern that landfill was not the appropriate means of waste disposal for much of the waste that was being generated throughout the region. There were also concerns about greenhouse gases and the contamination of the watertable, and a range of other concerns with which we are all generally familiar.

The South Metropolitan Regional Council member councils embarked on a bold strategy to establish an operation at Canning Vale, in the City of Canning, that had three major components. First, it had a materials recovery facility, which still operates today and is involved in separating materials for reprocessing by various industries. Typically, the goods that are handled at the materials recovery facility are those that go into the yellow-topped recycling bins. The second operation is a green-waste processing facility, which turns green waste into mulch and soil conditioners for parks and road verges. That facility has been up and running for some time as well. The third and major part of the facility is an in-vessel composting facility, which turns general household waste into compost for agricultural use. If members have not visited such a facility, they really need to do so to observe what can be done to reduce household waste through a variety of methods and a series of processes whereby the raw waste material is dumped out of a rubbish truck at one end and ultimately emerges at the other end as a very fine form of agricultural compost. In the process, various metals are recovered and plastics are reduced and, obviously, organic material is reduced in size.

I understand that the overall investment in the operation to date has cost about \$70 million. That is a very significant cost, even for some of the major councils that are involved on this regional council. They were quite brave. I remember when they briefed me at the time on how they were going to deal with this issue. They commenced sending out rubbish-processing fees with the rates notices years in advance of where we are now; otherwise, there would have been a massive spike in people’s rates bills after a few years when the production that I am talking about came on stream. It was brave for those elected local government officials to go down that path and commence charging people extra to meet the needs of the future.

The major part of the operation opened in 2002. From memory, it was opened by Hon Judy Edwards, who was then the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, and it has been operating ever since. It appeared to work very well for some years without complaint until last year when we started to receive a range of complaints from nearby residents, particularly in the Leeming area. I will give a brief summary of my involvement and the opposition’s involvement in the issue. In August 2006 we were asked by local residents to investigate the odour problems from the waste facility that they were experiencing and had been experiencing for a few months. On Friday, 18 August 2006, Steve Thomas, MLA, the opposition’s environment spokesperson, and I visited the

Regional Resource Recovery Centre to examine the problem and to see what was being done about it. In brief, we were advised that the biofilters at the composting facility had not been maintained properly by another contractor and had ceased to function. The expression used was that the biofilters had “collapsed”; thereby, gases, or the odours that go with them, did not undergo the necessary filtration and escaped instead into the atmosphere. Steve Thomas and I examined the biofilters - I am talking about 5 000 cubic metres or so, from memory; it is quite a big structure - and we noted that they were being steadily rebuilt. Time precludes me from describing the very interesting structure, but, for the purposes of the exercise, the biofilters were being rebuilt from scratch at that time. We were told that the odour problem would be fixed probably by the end of November, when the new biofilters were up and running; however, in the meantime, we could expect that in the lead-up to the finish of the job, the odour problem would decline and become progressively better and finally disappear at the end of November. I might add that \$2.4 million was raised by the SMRC to fund the repair of the biofilters. It was a problem that the member councils took very seriously, and so they should have.

The SMRC has now taken over the running of the RRRC, which has taken some time while the SMRC has adapted its own procedures and established hands-on management at the plant. As I have just described, it has also done some repairs to the biofilters. One would have hoped that the odour problem would have gradually disappeared and finally disappeared completely around the end of November. That was not the case. I asked questions in Parliament of the government in good faith with the residents who had asked us to look into the matter. On 22 August, I asked a question about the matter, and the technical information provided by the government in response is on the record. On 29 August, I asked another question about related matters. I was asked to put the question on notice, which surprised me a bit at the time because I thought the government would have been right up to it. However, I received an answer to that question on, I think, 24 October, and other questions have been asked in various fora.

Steve Thomas and I were thinking that we would revisit this plant on 1 December. By then we were hoping that everything would be fixed, that the complaints would have stopped and that the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council would be on top of everything under government supervision. On 13 November, further complaints started, and since then there has been an avalanche of complaints. I clocked more than 230 complaints from local residents by the end of last week by email alone. I again visited the plant on 1 December and spoke to the chief executive officer, Stuart McCall, and Councillor Doug Thompson from the City of Fremantle. They spoke about plans for testing to establish once and for all the nature and origin of the odours that seemed to persist. They maintained that they were fixing the problem. Residents maintained that they were suffering quite grievous effects from the excessive odours. There were stories about people’s backyard weddings or parties being cancelled because of the stench that was coming through the whole neighbourhood, about people not able to switch on their air conditioners and about people suffering health problems. Clearly, there was a need to balance the rights of complainants with the need to test them and address any problem that existed. I am sure that the complainants are absolutely genuine and that people are suffering. The plant therefore has been under attack and is having its own internal difficulties. On one hand, it represents a massive investment by all the ratepayers of the region, including the people of Leeming, that is essential for the future waste management of the region. On the other hand, people are complaining - I believe they are quite sincere and genuine - about the grievous effects of the odour problem. Something must be done to solve the problem. We have looked to the state government to see what it will do. I do not know where the state government stands on this issue. Back in late November, then responsible Minister McGowan said that the plant would stay open despite the problems. In late December, then new Minister McRae closed the plant. Then in late January or early February, the plant was reopened. Now, of course, Minister McRae has disappeared and there is another minister - Minister Templeman. I understand that the plant has again closed, although it was not necessarily closed by the government on this occasion. The complaints continue. The future of waste management in the south metro region is unclear. The investment by south metropolitan region residents and their councils is in jeopardy. I am asking: what is the government doing?

Therefore, the purpose of this motion is, firstly, to raise these issues because the member councils and the residents of the districts - the complainants - all have valid issues and need to know what will happen with them and their lives in the future. The uncertainty of the stop-start nature of this saga is causing great distress to all concerned. The first purpose of this motion, therefore, is to raise these issues with government. Then, of course, the next purpose of the motion is to give the government an opportunity to correct, if necessary, what I am telling the house or to give its version of what has been happening in this matter. The third purpose of this motion is to give the government an opportunity to tell us what it will do, because at this stage, it has been flip-flopping backwards and forwards. The government is caught in a very difficult situation: between an acknowledgement that this is an important waste management facility that the whole region relies on, and an acknowledgement that some residents are being very seriously affected. The government does not seem to know what to do. It has flipped and flopped. This place has been open and shut. It has been under attack and it has been defended. What on earth is its future? I guess the ball is now fairly and squarely in the government’s court, and I look forward to hearing from the minister about what the government will do about it.

HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral - Minister for Regional Development) [3.54 pm]: I note with interest the comments of Hon Simon O'Brien. Indeed, the remarks he made are pretty well accurate with regard to the chronology of events with the plant that have led to the current position in which we find ourselves. I have a Department of Environment and Conservation chronology of events that I will read with the indulgence of the house, and then I will make some comments about the way we will move forward.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Given the time.

Hon JON FORD: Yes, given the time.

The Department of Environment and Conservation has been working closely with the SMRC with regard to the Regional Resource Recovery Centre for almost 12 months now. It has therefore been an ongoing, long drawn-out process. Hon Simon O'Brien was right in that the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council during that period engaged a consultant to produce an odour reduction plan in May 2006 at a cost of about \$2.4 million. Works were progressing well until November 2006, when there was a steep increase in odour complaints along with a blow-out in the timetable for the completion of works. That is the chronology from December 2006 to March 2007.

On 20 December 2006, DEC issued a prevention notice to prevent waste from being accepted at the facility until odour emissions were resolved, and the facility was closed for approximately six weeks. The notice was lifted on 2 February 2007 after DEC received an independently verified assurance from the SMRC that the issues identified in the notice had been addressed. Lifting of this notice was subject to the SMRC implementing additional management measures to control odours and to continue close monitoring. DEC officers have continued to carry out inspections and respond to complaints. For a period the odours close to the facility had been regarded as low. However, on at least two occasions in March 2007, in response to some ongoing local complaints, an officer detected strong odours at the plant about 500 metres from the facility.

DEC issued three environmental field notices in the first three weeks of March to the SMRC in response to some ongoing odour issues, and the SMRC voluntarily closed the facility on 26 March after receiving advice from DEC that a further prevention notice would be served on 30 March if the situation was not rectified. The SMRC has advised DEC that the recent escalation of odours was due to a biofilter failure during the commissioning of new air management works. Immediate steps were being taken to correct the situation. The SMRC is still to complete further odour reduction works and confirms that it can manage odours satisfactorily at the site. Complaints are still being received from residents, despite the facility being temporarily closed at this time. If and when the SMRC recommences receiving treatment waste, DEC will give the SMRC a reasonable opportunity to comply with the odour emission conditions of the original approval, but if excessive odours remain after completion of the works, DEC will decide on appropriate enforcement action, which could include closure and prosecution. During the start-up period, DEC will closely monitor this facility and will not hesitate to take action. That is the chronology of events, and it seems to fit in neatly with what Hon Simon O'Brien said.

Currently, I understand that the way in which the biofilters are run is an operational matter. There is therefore a problem not with the biofilters as such, but with the methodology by which they are maintained and how they function. To resolve that issue, the SMRC has engaged the country's best experts in this particular technology, who are working with the SMRC to resolve those issues. It seems that a definitive problem has been identified, but further work is being done to ensure that those operational issues do not carry on to future operations. I am advised that DEC has advised the SMRC that although we are very supportive of recycling, we are on our last legs in allowing it to work. The DEC will allow the company to start operations, but it should be under no illusion that if failures continue, a closure order will be served on the company.

Hon Simon O'Brien: What would be the future of waste management disposal south of the river then? There is a string of councils, five or six, sending all their waste, including green waste and everything else, to this place.

Hon JON FORD: I have not had a full response on that other than that leading up to the period when the plant is expected to start, government agencies will be working very closely to ensure that this is a success. Looking at this retrospectively, there are some lessons to be learnt on both sides. I understand there was a view in the department that parts of the regional resource recovery project did not quite understand the seriousness of the problem and saw it as just an operational issue that could kick on. There are always problems on both sides of the fence with these issues. I hope, and the government hopes, that we now have a closer cooperative effort between the SMRC and DEC to resolve this issue. I daresay Hon Simon O'Brien will keep us on the ball and ask questions if the problem continues. The responsible minister has told me he is satisfied there is an understanding by all parties that they have to work to find a final solution rather than a patch-up job. This is a concerted effort to ensure that this important facility gets on with the business.

HON PAUL LLEWELLYN (South West) [4.02 pm]: The Greens would support a motion like this primarily because it is a truism. It reads -

That this house consider as a matter of urgency the ongoing complaints of excessive odour emission from the South Metropolitan Regional Council's Regional Resource Recovery Centre . . .

We are doing that. The motion raises quite a number of questions. As members will appreciate, the Greens have a real interest in waste management and recycling. The regional resource recovery project at Canning Vale is a brave and important experiment in dealing with the waste the community generates. We ask ourselves: what is the problem? The problem is the waste. We ask ourselves: what is the solution? In this instance the solution is to set up facilities that actually deal with our waste. The component of the facility that is causing the problem, as I understand it, is the composting component. As a community, we are a throwaway society that takes packaged goods, consumes what it wants, puts its waste in plastic bags and throws them in the bin. They go out the door and get delivered by truck to a waste facility. We have fundamentally transferred the problem of waste disposal on a very large scale, in this case to the combined shires of the South Metropolitan Regional Council.

The SMRC claims that the facility will prevent an average of 80 000 tonnes of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere every year. This facility is making a major contribution in its own way to reducing the otherwise problematic issue of greenhouse gases going into the atmosphere when waste is buried in the ground and creates methane and causes other problems. We can compare that 80 000 tonnes of greenhouse gases with a reduction of 90 000 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions a year if the state government, as it expects, purchases 20 per cent of all of its power from renewable energy by 2020. Right now, that facility is almost doing the same task that the state government will be doing by purchasing 20 per cent of its energy from renewable energy. It is a useful comparison. I have the same press releases and information as the minister. We are spending another \$2.4 million to deal with odour management. I would like to give a very brief description of the Saria Industries waste management facility I saw in Germany two or three months ago. It was massive. It had a composting facility that was very high-tech. The company took all the compost, blended it into different fractions and compressed it into briquettes, literally using technology from a brick-making factory. Holes are drilled through the bricks to expose the surfaces to air; otherwise, they would not decompose. Forklifts are then used to put the briquettes on pallets and into a very large wind tunnel to control the breakdown of the compost. This occurs in an urban area. It was enlightening to see that the company has the best innovative technology to cope with the problem of composting on a much bigger scale than I imagine the south metropolitan facility to be. However, it took many years of development to get the German facility running smoothly. From memory, that company invests something like €400 million in new projects each year. When we are dealing with the waste from our communities, we are talking about big investments requiring big thinking and big solutions.

The fact that there is an issue with the south metropolitan region facility is probably a signal to the people around there. Is this a failure of planning, a failure of design or a failure of operation and management of the facility? I suspect there has been a planning failure because of the co-location of the community and the facility, perhaps because of historical circumstances. There is probably also some failure of design because we are practising now, and we have not worked out this problem completely. I suspect we now must design an improved system, not just a ducting system to take away the odours, to manage large-scale composting. The German system I described is a good example of that. It took many years to design that system.

We are giving consideration to the issues that have arisen as a result of a series of complaints. I do not know how many complaints were made. I have read reference to it in the newspaper, but I do not know how many repeat complaints there were. Is it the same cohort of people complaining? How many people are in the odour catchment area? What is the intensity of complaints? We do not know. It is not good that anybody should have to complain, but we need to know whether there are habitual complainants or whether this is a fair and reasonable representation of all the possible complaints that could come in and whether we are dealing with something substantial.

In response to this whole issue, I actually made a request to see that facility for myself, and the managers did not really respond to that request. I am quite concerned that we get our composting right and that we deal with our organic waste in a responsible way.

Hon Simon O'Brien: I'd encourage you to keep doing that. I think it would be very useful for you to visit the plant.

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: That is right. I have seen the one in Wanneroo, and, as I said, I went to two in Germany.

Hon Simon O'Brien: Perhaps I might be able to facilitate that visit for you, if you want.

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: I would welcome Hon Simon O'Brien doing that. I would be happy to do that. The question now is: without allocating blame, how do we actually find a solution? This is not something that we must shift to just the council or to the state government to find a solution. Probably 400 000 people are contributing to that waste stream. I do not know - it could be 250 000 people who are contributing to that waste stream. Therefore, we need to find a community-based solution.

We can have this discussion again. I believe that we should bring in the evidence and gather some more information about how there has been a failure at this facility. However, I do not think it is a situation in which

we can allocate blame too easily, given that we are all part of this mess that is called waste management and recycling.

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [4.11 pm]: I thank the minister, in his representative capacity, for his involvement, and I also thank Hon Paul Llewellyn for his comments and for his involvement in this important matter. I see that I have a few minutes to exercise a right of reply. We hear about best experts being engaged by the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council. Frankly, I think that this should have been happening over the past year. When I last met with Councillor Thompson and Chief Executive Officer McCall on 1 December - I have known them for years, and I know them as honourable men - we talked about the expert technology that was available. What has been happening is that the Department of Environment and Conservation has been responding to complaints. When a complaint is received, it sends someone around to the street from which the complaint has come to have a sniff to see whether he can also smell any pong. Steve Thomas and I have been there on a number of occasions. It is not far from where I live. We have gone there to see people. We have met people on the side of the road, outside their houses, to have a sniff. I must admit that I have not smelt anything too bad. I guess it is a bit like - I say this jokingly, as I have said to residents - when a person has an electric appliance that does not work. When the repairman comes around and that person seeks to demonstrate how his appliance is playing up, the damn thing functions perfectly, and so it happens that sometimes people miss these odour episodes. However, I understand that they are severe.

I understand that the expert technology that is available even includes the capacity to trap air at various sites, and somehow it is preserved as a genuine sample that can be assessed for odour. We can get almost a forensic blueprint to work out exactly where it has come from, which is a lot better than a bloke getting out of a ute and having a sniff of the air to see whether anything is coming from the local waste site. If that sort of technology is available - I do not know - it should have been deployed a long time ago.

Hon Jon Ford: I understand that there's nothing wrong with the technology; it's an operational issue.

Hon SIMON O'BRIEN: Yes. That raises an interesting point as well. Because it is an aerobic system and it must push the air through the biofilter mass before it gets to the outside, negative pressure is needed in the main part of the building. If that negative pressure does not keep pushing it through the biofilters, of course it will go out the doors that are open for big trucks to come in and all sorts of things. I have been there. We have thrown up bits of paper in front of the doors to check that negative pressure is sucking air through those openings into the building, rather than odours coming out. However, if some operational matters are preventing that from happening, that needs to be corrected.

We come back to the basic point. This plant is responsible at the moment for the vast majority of the waste disposal across the south metropolitan region. The investment is now well over \$70 million, and local residents are paying for that. The consequence of these odours is that this plant might be forced to close. I have said publicly that if the odour problem cannot be resolved, people cannot live like that, so the plant might have to close. That would be a very expensive mistake, whether it is an operational, a management or a technology issue. It would be a disaster. Conversely, the residents who are affected by odour are apparently suffering a disaster every day of their lives, and we must offer some comfort and relief to them.

Perhaps what is needed is a parliamentary inquiry. I believe that our Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs might be well placed to take this up because it is such a serious issue. That committee could look at some of the matters that have been raised. Hon Paul Llewellyn's suggestion was to query how genuine the complaints are and get to the bottom of that, and to take some evidence. The committee could talk to all the councils involved, because I know that they would like to have their say in the public debate. The committee could look at how efficient the plant is. I understand that last November the power bill was \$156 956. Is it costing more in greenhouse gases than it is actually saving? For all those reasons, we need one of our parliamentary committees to look at this issue. I hope that is a matter that will be able to be taken up in due course when I approach the committee to ask it to do so.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.

GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Motion

Resumed from 29 March on the following motion moved by Hon Norman Moore (Leader of the Opposition) -

That this house expresses its grave concern at the significant deterioration in the governance and administration of the state of Western Australia resulting from a government preoccupied with continued internal division and conflict, manipulated by outside influences and increasingly demonstrating serious signs of dysfunction, and calls on the government to urgently address the issues raised by the Corruption and Crime Commission and refocus its attention on restoring public confidence in the capacity of the government to govern for all Western Australians without fear or favour.