

MOBILONG PRISON – 30 October 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (12:11): I move:

That this house—

- (a) condemns the government for not conducting adequate local consultation on the effect of the proposed extensions to the Mobilong Prison facility, having regard to the need for improvements in public infrastructure services to cater for an increase in prisoner transfers and visitations as well as prison staff; and
- (b) calls on the government to consider the increased load on local infrastructure and services and, as a matter of urgency, prepare and publish a regional impact statement in relation to the said extensions.

I refer to the news release on Thursday 21 September 2006 (budget day) that Mobilong would be expanded to accommodate 760 men and 150 women prisoners. This has since been expanded to 940 men and 230 women. The news came as a surprise to the local council—the Rural City of Murray Bridge—as promises had been made by the government that the council would be informed before any announcement was made. During question time, I asked the Attorney-General:

Why did the government fail to advise the Mayor and the Rural City of Murray Bridge Council that the new prison would be located at Murray Bridge before the announcement was made?

The following explanation was given:

At a meeting with council in June 2006, attended by Correctional Services CEO Peter Severin and the Director of Prison Infrastructure John Case, Mr Severin informed council that there were no plans for any site in South Australia at that time. At the same meeting, Mr Severin said he would engage council if, and when, Murray Bridge became an option for the new location. He further advised that thorough community consultation and engagement would occur prior to any decision.

The Attorney-General's reply was:

All will be revealed in the budget.

Later in the afternoon session, the Treasurer announced the project as part of the budget Appropriation Bill. The Treasurer said:

A new prison precinct will be established near Murray Bridge. The precinct, adjacent to the existing Mobilong Prison, is expected to be fully operational by 2011-12. The precinct will include: a new 760 bed—men's prison—increasing capacity from the overcrowded Yatala Labour Prison by 419 beds; and a new 150 bed—women's prison—increasing capacity by 58 beds.

In the same speech, the Treasurer said:

As a result, the Yatala Labour Prison and the Adelaide Women's Prison will be closed. Also removed from the Northfield site will be the pre-release centre, and that land will be available for to the development.

He added:

The new prisons will free up the Northfield site for significant housing development.

This development will generate significant additional revenue for the state in so many ways, revenue it seems it is not prepared to share with the Rural City of Murray Bridge council, which will be faced with many additional infrastructure and service costs as the expansion is constructed and becomes operational.

In the same question time session before the Treasurer's announcement, I also asked the Attorney-General the following question:

Will the Attorney-General advise the house what plans the government has made to upgrade existing infrastructure and services at Murray Bridge to cater for the significant increase in activity resulting from the projected tripling of the current prison capacity?

—to which I added the following explanation:

The Chief Executive Officer of the Murraylands Regional Development Board has raised concerns regarding the adequacy of current services, including housing, transport, education, health, mental health and counselling services.

In his reply the Attorney-General was again evasive and deceptive, choosing to avoid answering the direct question about government plans to support local council and even implying that he did not know for sure what was in the budget—and that announcement was due within the hour. He also suggested, quite incorrectly and unfairly, that the council and I were ungrateful for the decision to place one of the state's major prison facilities near Murray Bridge, again avoiding the obvious point that promises made and common courtesies had been ignored in the government's attempt to make political gain from the announcement.

The success of such a major project will depend in part on establishing a relationship of trust and cooperation between the two levels of government—something this government clearly does not respect or understand. The point of my question, which the Attorney-General so deliberately avoided, was that the government had failed dismally in providing a reasonable level of communication—more particularly, two-way communication—with its intended project partner. Despite assurances from various government sources to the contrary, this has continued.

The Rural City of Murray Bridge council formed the New Prisons and Secure Facilities Project Working Party specifically to consider and identify matters of importance and concern to the community and to provide a discussion forum for the interested parties to maintain communication on the numerous areas of concern. The group includes local government officers and councillors, the local regional development board, local public services (including hospital and police), local health services, representatives from prison infrastructure, the Department of Health, mental health operations, transport organisations, the Office of Regional Affairs, and other interested community groups and services. Council has acknowledged that the participation and cooperation of these various departments and services is welcomed, but its attempts to elicit reasonable responses from ministers in some departments have been less favourable.

In the minutes of the working party's meeting of February 2008 it was 'noted and appreciated that the Department of Corrections continues to work with council on this project.' The minutes of a subsequent meeting on 16 May this year noted that on 7 February Council had written to the minister concerning several items of infrastructure, including the upgrade of Bremer Road, stormwater systems, independent overflow to reduce the drain on council services during storms, internal development of the site, and bus services. At that time, on 16 May, no substantial response had been received from the minister and it was resolved to again write to the minister requesting a response to matters raised.

On 21 May a letter was received from Minister Zollo explaining that the matters had been referred to appropriate staff to investigate and prepare briefing papers for the government to consider. It is my understanding that relevant discussions took place, although no subsequent response was made to the local council. In her letter of 21 May, Minister Zollo also pointed out that, as Minister for Correctional Services, she was unable to respond to the matter of public transport services between Murray Bridge and Adelaide. She explained that that was a matter for the Minister for Transport.

This has highlighted one of Council's continuing frustrations: the need to deal with so many different ministers for the various aspects of the development. At the most recent meeting of the working party on 15 October, Mayor Arbon again referred to this problem and its capacity to hinder inquiries and progress on their deliberations. It must be said a State Government Cross-agency Project Steering Committee has been formed, but the council's request to have an observer present at its meetings has been refused. It seems that the lack of efficient and productive communication is a recurring theme within this government.

Council has been left holding the baby on several other aspects of this development. The issue of whether the development would be a rateable project is now the subject of conflicting advice. It was understood, through Minister Zollo, that as it was a public-private partnership it would be rateable. Council believes that this will be a state prison, not a regional one; and as such it should not be required to subsidise the project. Since that time it has been made clear that Treasurer Foley has no intention of paying council rates, to such an extent that he would be prepared to change legislation in order to avoid doing so.

The matter of transport service needs has the potential to become a critical factor in this expansion project. Locating such a major prison facility in a regional centre some 80 kilometres from the city hub from where regional transport services depart will present many

challenges to a transport system that is already regarded as inadequate. The transport needs of visitors, staff, staff families, and others whose professions will require them to meet with prisoners, will require frequent and regular services that currently do not exist.

Council's view, which was shared by others, was that a metro ticket system should be introduced, and early indications were that such a system could be dovetailed with the requirement for visitors to book their visits in advance. Council has since been advised that there will be no metro ticket service, the reason being that it might set a precedent for other peri-urban areas to demand a similar service. As the mayor pointed out at the time that statement was made at the working party's October meeting, this is hardly a precedent. Other regional centres close to the city are not playing host to a very substantial state facility; therefore, there is no precedent.

There was enthusiastic agreement at that meeting that efficient, effective transport will be vital to the success of this project. There was much debate about the likelihood of people relocating to live in the district, a factor which greatly affects demand for transport services, both prison-specific and public. Some previous experience suggests that two-thirds of the estimated 500 workers will relocate, but the suggestion has been put that many would choose not to uproot the entire family for a commutable distance.

As for families and partners of inmates, the belief is that, as the facility will be high security with many inmates serving longer terms, their families will relocate. Other experience indicates that the socio-economics of inmate families will limit the number that are willing and able to shift. A study of the same matter in Lithgow determined that were very few partners or families who relocated to that town. It is easy to see how these factors will place high demands on transport services.

The last direct contact with the minister on the bus problem was in mid-July, which resulted in an assurance that the government would investigate some 'creative ways' to solve the problem. One can only guess what they may be, and whether the problem the government seeks to solve creatively is the actual transport problem or that of finding a creative way to shift the responsibility and cost of a solution to local government and the community.

The council has been extremely proactive in addressing the social impact of the prison expansion. It has conducted public forums and established the New Prisons and Security Facilities Project Working Party to identify and consider all of the concerns the local residents and business community have in relation to the potential effects on local infrastructure and services. This has led to council—I stress 'council'—having to commission a Strategic Community Impact Study to deal directly with the social impact and ultimately develop a regional action plan.

I applaud council's initiative in accepting responsibility for what would seem to be a state government responsibility. An approach to the government to fund this project was rejected, partly, I am told, because notice was too short. It would not have been unreasonable to think that far from claiming too little notice, government should have recognised the inevitable need for such a project during the prison expansion planning stage and initiated it itself.

While another application for funding may be lodged, it seems unfair that a substantial amount of ratepayers' money should have to be committed to a project that was precipitated by a state government decision to build a state facility.

Another facet of government's lack of understanding of or care for the social impacts of this expansion is in its response to an inquiry concerning the capability of local schools—preschool, primary and secondary—to manage the influx of a possible 500 extra students. The Department of Education and Children's Services reply to that inquiry declared that an assessment had found that the DECS-owned schools have:

Adequate capacity in teaching space accommodation to absorb the addition of almost 500 primary and high school students.

It goes on:

The establishment of the new prisons and secure facilities in Murray Bridge will have no impact on the school system in the region and...education facilities will adequately accommodate any additional families moving in to the area.

This response drew gasps of disbelief when it was read out at the October meeting. The reference to 'teaching space accommodation' could well be a carefully chosen phrase, but nobody could seriously believe that floor space alone would provide adequate education for students. Adequate education is a product of many things, of which space itself is only one.

- Is the department referring to yard space or classroom space?
- Is it proposing to dump some old transportables on even more of the open space that is treasured by staff and students?
- Has it considered that some of these additional students may require additional services and support such as special counselling?
- Has it established adequate inter-agency support from the district office?

Perhaps most disturbing of all: the funding cuts proposed by this government will reduce the capacity of many schools, including some in Murray Bridge. Was this possibility factored in to the DECS response? Not very likely. It might make an interesting agenda item for a meeting of the State Government Cross Agency Project Steering Committee, to which council has been denied access.

In my closing remarks I would add that there will be no room at the local hospitals and no room at the local clinics. The health authority has said that there is no room for any additional services for prisoners in the town. There are other issues with the forensic mental health facility, as with the prison, on attracting professional services to the town. I commend the motion.