

Extract from *Hansard*

Tuesday, 26 May 2009

Budget Estimates Committee – Regional Development and Lands

Dr M.D. NAHAN: My question refers to page 245 of the budget papers. Under major policy decisions, there is reference to an allocation of \$54 million over five years to community resource centres. Can the minister describe the functions of these centres and how they differ from telecentres?

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: I thank the member for Riverton for the question. The telecentre network comprises 103 centres across regional Western Australia, which were basically set up in the 1990s to deliver computer access and communications to people with the advent of increased computer use and the internet.

Over the ensuing 20-odd years, things have changed substantially; most people now have a computer and internet access at home. I think the telecentre network was probably heading for a slow demise unless we revitalised it and looked at what was needed for the future, which is exactly what we intend to do. We believe that telecentres can basically become the government agency in each of these smaller communities.

We believe that many of those communities have felt very removed from government and the service delivery of government, and we look forward through the telecentre revitalisation plan to growing the scope and capacity of telecentres to deliver government services to their communities.

The initial money we have outlaid is to give the centres greater support to have a full-time employee. The operational grant only ever allowed them \$20 000 a year; therefore, some of the telecentres found it very difficult to have a full-time coordinator and others looked to outside revenue sources to get that full-time coordinator to keep the doors open from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. I thought it was a problem when, basically, a government department was having people fundraise to try to pay the salary of the one staffer who actually ran it.

Therefore, we look to put the telecentres on a footing whereby they can have enough regular income to have a full-time employee, and we have given them some equipment upgrades. The telecentres are a unique way for government departments to provide information to those local communities. I have been using them substantially with government announcements because invariably government announcements are made in the metropolitan area.

From the point of view of the Department of Local Government and Regional Development, we are making announcements in the metropolitan area that country people cannot come to. We have been encouraging people to get to their telecentres, where we use the cameras referred to by the member for Pilbara to film those launches.

That means that country people can share in the same speech that is made at the launch. We think that is very important. I am actually now encouraging other ministers to do the same thing. Enormous savings can be made by using videoconferencing. I had an excellent meeting in the Pilbara earlier this year, where 50 people in a room in the Pilbara were working in two ways with me they were asking me questions, and I was answering them.

Had we not done that, either they would have had to come to Perth, or I would have had to go to the Pilbara, for the meeting. Dumas House has a Westlink studio on the ground floor of the building. That was set up by the previous government. I think ministers should be using that much more to link up with regional communities and to put that information out. A review is currently being done to look at how we can grow telecentres and resource centres in the community going forward.

There is a lot of interest in basically making the telecentre the cross-agency department in each town, so that if the Minister for Health wanted to get some information out, the first port of call would be for the local community to go to the telecentre, and it would effectively become that linkage back to government. Tasmania has done this quite well.

In Tasmania, the telecentres are a one-stop government shop. That allows smaller communities that do not have a government presence to get a government presence in that way. That work is being done. I will be getting a report back on that at the end of June, and we will then start to put that in place.

To give members an idea of some of the things that are already happening, Bendigo Bank has come to see me, because it believes that it can put banking facilities into every one of these towns, and it wants to know whether the government is interested in partnering with it in doing that. That is quite an exciting development.

During the current economic downturn, we have been using these telecentres quite effectively in some of the towns in which we have had major problems, such as Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun, and in Harvey with Harvey Beef, to coordinate the government response.

In Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun, for example, the small business centre sent its experts to the town, and they based themselves in the telecentre, and people could make appointments to see them to get advice. That gave people the knowledge that the government was in their community and they had a door that they would walk through to find someone to talk to; and, if that expert did not have the answer, it would at least link the person to the government department that did have the answer.

That is probably the best example I have seen of how we can grow a telecentre into a community resource centre and link it up with all the different government departments.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Has any consideration been given to linking this with private sector use and commonwealth government use. I am thinking, for instance, of things such as a post office or community groups that want to liaise with other people so that it would be a community-based and not just a government support facility?

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: There are definitely opportunities for that to take place, particularly in some of the larger telecentres that have the facilities available. The telecentre at Waroona, which I visited a couple of weeks ago, has built a co-location precinct right next door to the local government facility. In that precinct they have built doctors' rooms, where the visiting doctor works three days a week, and other rooms for visiting accountants and other professionals, and that has been linked in with the private sector.

We are working quite closely with the commonwealth on delivering some of the commonwealth regional development programs through state functions. Once a telecentre has been morphed into a community resource centre, what it can do is probably limitless if it has the space and the capacity.

One of the advantages is that each telecentre has a local board, and that means that the telecentres can also prioritise what they are doing. We will see how that advances out, but it is a great opportunity.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: In the past, some of the regions have had inadequate capacity for large-scale broadband communication. Is that an issue that the program is looking at?

Mr B.J. GRILLS: Most of the town centres now have internet access. That may not be at cable speed, but the speeds are much better than they were previously. The major problems now are outside the town areas. As I said in answer to one of the earlier questions, we are also looking at a program of expanding the base stations.

The new wireless broadband technology is the way of the future for the more remote locations. We are also working with the commonwealth on its national broadband network to see how we can tie our programs in with that program to get the best possible coverage for regional areas. Once again, the community resource centre can play a key role in that.