

Extract from *Hansard*

Thursday, 22 September 2011

SOUTHERN METROPOLITAN REGIONAL COUNCIL — COMPOSTING PLANT

Grievance

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton) [9.38 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Environment. As the minister is aware, the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council's composting plant has a long history of emitting odour pollution to the local communities of Willetton and Leeming and Canning Vale's industrial area. Despite many promises and attempts over the past eight years to fix the problem, the SMRC has failed to do so.

As the minister will recognise from his trips to the plant, the odours are from rotting and fermenting garbage and other waste, primarily from this composting plant. It is almost impossible to get the odours out of people's clothes and home furnishings. People cannot use their houses and air conditioning during peak times. Because of the stench, people cannot have barbecues outside and elderly people and families with young children who live near the plant have lost amenity of their own homes. Importantly, housing values in the area have collapsed and people are finding it difficult to sell their houses; it is even worse than in the general area. This cannot be allowed to continue.

When the plant was proposed around a decade ago, it was realised that similar plants around the world had odour emission problems. The SMRC committed to avoiding these odour problems at its plant. I need to mention that most similar plants around the world have closed because of odour and other issues.

Despite these commitments, the plant has emitted excessive odour pollution from the start. Moreover, it has proved to be very, very difficult for the affected community to seek redress and hold the SMRC to account. The plant's problems start from its location. It was built downwind easterly and within 450 metres of existing suburbs. The second problem relates to the technology it uses, which has failed here and elsewhere.

In December 1996, the then Minister for Environment closed the composting plant because of excessive odours—right before Christmas, thankfully. The SMRC at the time denied that the plant was emitting pollution but has subsequently admitted that it knew that one of its biofilters had stopped working and was emitting stench into the community. The plant was allowed to reopen in January or February 2007. The SMRC then closed down the plant itself again in March 2007 when it was threatened with another forced closure by DEC. It was allowed to reopen the plant after a short time and after it promised to have permanently solved the problem. Soon after reopening in March 2007, the plant began to emit odour pollution in the community. It took the community over a year of lobbying to get DEC to undertake a systematic testing of odour in the area. This was done during the first quarter of 2008. The results took six months to process. In the meantime, the community was subjected to over a year of pollution.

During this time the SMRC again denied that the plant was emitting the pollution. DEC released the odour report in October 2008 and issued an environmental protection notice on the SMRC under section 65 of the Environmental Protection Act. Under this environmental protection notice, DEC required the SMRC to produce an odour abatement plan. DEC engaged consultant engineers to undertake peer review work of SMRC's consultants. This was promised by DEC and the SMRC to solve the problem.

Later that year, 2009, the Department of Health issued a report on the SMRC composting plant. The report identified that a large range of volatile organic compounds were being released from the facility at the time of testing. Estimates of odour concentration were made at the boundary of the SMRC plant and with different areas. They found all sorts of significant trace elements related to odour in the area. At the same time the odour surveyors reported that odour was being readily detected up to 1 000 metres from the plant.

Chemical sampling found excessive concentration levels of compounds related to odours. The Department of Health's report went on to say that approximately 93 per cent of the residents within 600 metres of the plant reported odours, and only 12 per cent believed the upgrades to the plant to combat the odours were successful. The SMRC denied all these. Three years later, nothing has changed. DEC is undertaking yet another odour survey, and the results again are unequivocal. The SMRC plant is the source of odour, and the odours are serious and widespread.

DEC staff told me that a review of the 300 or so valid odour logs during the latest test reveal that 193 relate to the plant. These results have been cross-referenced and verified by DEC's own results and complaints from the community.

It is of enormous concern that the SMRC's chairman, Tony Romano, and the chief executive, Stuart McAll, are still saying in the media that they are waiting to meet with DEC over the results of these recent odours. They are saying that DEC has not talked to them. In a briefing that I received from DEC's officers on 14 September 2011, I was informed that both these men from the SMRC, along with their technical staff, had attended a briefing in the days prior to my briefing—that is, they had a meeting on 3 September—but Mr Romano and Mr McAll had chosen to leave that meeting and not be briefed. Surely, as directors of the SMRC, they have a duty of care to ensure they are fully informed about important surveys and damaging results from their operations.

This is a long, sorry saga. We have problems with trying to detect odour pollution and to enforce commitments to avoid odour pollution. I readily admit it is not an easy area. But it is time to draw a line in the sand. The technology, the location and the management of this plant are not up to par, and it has seriously affected people in my electorate and the electorate of Jandakot for too long. It is time to put an end to it.

I welcomed the minister's recent statements on this, particularly to give a six-month deadline for the SMRC to fix the problems, but I also emphasise that the licence for the plant comes up for renewal on 22 October. I urge the minister to not renew that licence so that it overrides the six-month deadline to fix this problem.

MR W.R. MARMION (Nedlands — Minister for Environment) [9.45 am]: I thank the member for Riverton for raising this grievance with me and also for his continuous involvement in this issue over many months. I also acknowledge that he knows that I understand the community's concerns, because I have toured the plant with the member. I think it was almost an hour-and-a-half tour. I also note that I lasted longer than the member for Riverton; the member for Riverton left early. I acknowledge that there are odours, particularly on site, but I understand, if something is going wrong with the plant, that periodically the odours, because of the wind direction, could obviously affect residents.

I also acknowledge that this has been an extremely long-running issue. I did not realise how long it was until I heard the member's grievance. Clearly, there is still an odour problem. Odour pollution is a complex problem to solve.

The member has highlighted the fact that over many years, it seems, despite what they have done, they have not been able to control the problem.

As members are aware, an odour study was undertaken. It was an extensive study that involved the community. It also involved 120 hours of DEC time outside hours, so it was a very comprehensive study. I have not received the final study, because it is up to the peer review, but the study appears to confirm that there are obviously still odour problems. Despite \$2 million being spent on work at the plant a year ago and some tweaking—we understand, obviously, that when we tweak it there could be start-up problems—the odour problems do not seem to have gone away.

In terms of this recent study, 330 observations were taken. According to 130 of the observations, the odours were related to the facility. There has to be a proper scientific basis before we do anything. One could argue that perhaps we now have that. Next week or the week after when I receive and look at the final report, perhaps we will have some scientific basis for saying that there is an odour problem, and asking whether it has been fixed and what we should do.

The member has raised an issue with me before. The SMRC waste facility is quite a complex, expensive facility that has been put in place. The member has suggested that the technology may not be right. I am not the expert in that area. These things require a scientific basis for their operation. It appears that the odours are not being addressed.

The licence is coming up for renewal again. One of my agencies, the Waste Authority, actually makes grants to organisations to get rid of waste. The SMRC waste recovery facility does get grants. I understand the member's concern: why are we giving the facility money? "Are we throwing good money after bad?" is one of the comments the member has made to me in the past.

I have written to the Minister for Local Government, seeking his advice on the financial solvency of the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council.

The member also raised in his grievance an issue close to my heart—that is, buffers. People may suggest that it is an asset for a community to have a facility that gets rid of waste, but if the odours or whatever from such a facility impact on the surrounding area, obviously the solution is to have a reasonable buffer. The member mentioned that when the facility was first put in place, houses were within 450 metres. I understand that in some instances houses are closer than that now.

Dr M.D. Nahan: The plant is within 450 metres, but the headquarters of the SMRC is within 150 metres.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I know of licences in other industries that require much larger buffers, and one could argue that those industries have fewer odour problems than a waste facility. The counterargument is that perhaps a well-run waste facility without odour emissions may need smaller buffers.

Dr M.D. Nahan interjected.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Correct.

Dr M.D. Nahan: The real issue is the easterly.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Buffers should always take into account wind direction. I know that certainly with noise studies—it should also relate to odour—wind plume analyses need to be

done to show where the buffers should be. Perhaps in the past buffers were not done on a scientific basis, but that is another issue.

Where to now? That is really what the member wants to know. Certainly, a lot has been done in the past. I will soon have an odour study to look at that will have a comprehensive set of information. As the member has said, the licence is up for renewal. If we are to renew this licence, I expect the facility to address the community's concerns about the odour.

I expect that the information I will get from the Minister for Local Government about the solvency of the SMRC will be another factor. Unless I am comfortable that the odour can be controlled, and the next step may be to have very strong conditions for the SMRC to control the odour at the facility, which, if it does not meet —

Dr M.D. Nahan: The problem with the odour is that it takes about nine months to a year to do a survey and get results back.

Mr W.R. MARMION: There will be no more surveys. As far as I am concerned, that is the end of it. We have the data. Enough studies have been done on this facility. That is it. It now has to perform. That is what I will be looking for. If it does not perform, it might be in trouble.