

## MIDWEST — ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

### *Grievance*

**MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition)** [9.18 am]: My grievance to the Minister for Transport outlines the government's abject failure to invest in road infrastructure in the midwest. Those roads are the economic corridors that enable the export of mineral resources and grain from the Murchison and the midwest. After a wet winter, the roads are failing terribly. They are littered with potholes, road shoulders are collapsing and the road surfaces are quite literally disintegrating. Granted, these roads were not built for the volume and mass of the road trains currently delivering to the Geraldton port, but the government has no plan to fix this failing infrastructure. In 2020, the Mid West Ports Authority's port master plan acknowledged potential trade growth and the required infrastructure over a 30-year timeframe. The port's throughput last financial year was 17.3 million tonnes, with iron ore exports making up 72 per cent of that total, or 12.5 million tonnes, valued at \$1.45 billion. Since 2022, iron ore throughput at the port has increased 10 per cent year on year. The midwest is quite literally booming with major resource projects under development in the region and in the Murchison. In 2022, the \$350 million Geraldton port maximisation project sought to address the port's increased throughput, which is projected to reach 25 million tonnes per annum in 10 years, but, seemingly, no strategic thought has been given to the network of roads that radiate east, south and north from the Geraldton town site and enable delivery of the valuable resources to the port. How can government overlook this integral piece of the logistics puzzle?

Two major routes in particular cause me a great deal of concern at the moment from a road safety perspective. On the Geraldton–Mt Magnet Road, quad road trains currently deliver 150 tonnes of iron ore from as far as 500 kilometres away from Geraldton. Those quads travel through Mt Magnet, Yalgoo, Mullewa and on into Geraldton. There are very limited facilities in the Mt Magnet town site for truck drivers to pull over and check their tyres and load, and the rest bays on those long stretches of road are few and far between. The town centre of Mullewa is a muddy quagmire at the moment where the road trains are forced to slow down to the point at which they are crawling through the slush and potholes. The state of the road is tough on the trucks and hard going for drivers. I have visited the town regularly in the past few weeks and the situation is now desperate. In the town centre, the road is destroyed in one direction and should be closed. There is a need for traffic management and the road base will have to be completely rebuilt. I understand that a road train passes through town every six minutes, which equates to 220 truck movements a day. I have a great deal of sympathy for the townspeople who see their road continuing to disintegrate and for those who are hopeful of the tourist trade that comes with the approaching wildflower season. With the plentiful rains this year, there is no doubt the carpet of everlasting will put on a great wildflower show, but Mullewa artist Helen Ansell told the ABC that with some of the potholes a metre in diameter, she is concerned that caravans will not be able to park at the local information bay and that tourists may not stop. The mix of caravans and road trains on these roads is not ideal for the professional truck drivers or for the tourists and locals. It will be hard going on those rough and potholed roads.

As the road continues west to Geraldton and in the vicinity of Tenindewa, a 150-metre stretch of road was closed for several days from 10 June after a deluge of rain. Quad road trains had to wait on the road for it to reopen because there was nowhere to pull off. Within the 110-kilometre-an-hour stretches of road, there are now significant potholes that are 20 centimetres deep with no warning signs in place. This road is not fit for purpose. It needs a major upgrade with adequate stabilising material and thicker toppings to withstand the volume of those permitted 200-tonne quad road trains.

Another road of concern carries iron ore trucks from the Extension Hill mine through Perenjori, Morawa, Mingenew and Dongara, where the road trains join the Midlands Road then the Brand Highway. This is a 612-kilometre round trip to the Geraldton port. According to the locals, sections of road between Perenjori and Morawa are atrocious and littered with potholes, and the northbound road shoulder is collapsing under the weight of loaded iron ore trucks. As the chief executive officers of the local shires point out, these roads were designed and built in a different era and the standard of road construction has dropped in recent years. They are fearful of the added tourist traffic during the wildflower season and then the grain trucks during harvest. Main Roads Western Australia has started patching potholes, but large sections of road have deteriorated and major works will be needed when the road dries out. I have been told that up to 106 iron ore truck movements occur on this section of road daily, which is the equivalent of 120 000 tonnes of iron ore per month. Iron ore transport by road in the midwest requires a commercial goods vehicle licence, and transporters for Terra Mining were initially granted a three-month commercial goods vehicle licence in December 2023 while negotiations were underway to get the iron ore on rail. That interim licence has been further extended by 12 months to 31 March 2025. I remind members that the intent of that commercial goods vehicle licence is to regulate the transport of iron ore in order to optimise the use of rail transport.

Further to the north, George Grey Drive from Port Gregory and Chapman Valley Road, both important freight routes, desperately need upgrades. The Mid West Chamber of Commerce and Industry CEO, Joanne Fabling, says the state government has offered the midwest no vision for the future, adding that midwest roads were never

designed to carry the volume and tons of iron ore currently being trucked to the port. She also points to further disregard for the midwest with no pathway forward for the Geraldton and Northampton bypasses, the development of which urgently needs a staged approach.

Minister, I think I have made it clear that the situation is now critical. We have 200-tonne quad road trains legally travelling on the Geraldton–Mt Magnet Road that is literally disintegrating under the sheer weight and volume of those trucks. Mining companies have invested heavily in Murchison mines but the road infrastructure is failing. Similarly, 80-tonne road trains carrying iron ore and sharing the road with local traffic are travelling through the towns of Perenjori, Morawa, Mingenew and Dongara where, again, the roads need a major upgrade. The minister likes to remind us that Main Roads is back in the region, but we are yet to see the benefits in the midwest.

Sections of the road in the midwest where these road trains are travelling are devoid of adequate medical services and a rescue helicopter. The provision of a midwest helicopter based in Geraldton is a major commitment of the Nationals WA and our Geraldton candidate, Kirrilee Warr, and I have been pushing hard for its delivery. The Nationals WA in government will deliver that helicopter.

On behalf of the midwest community, I call on the Minister for Transport; Treasurer to get these roads fixed, to plan properly for the freight task and to pull the necessary levers to get ore on rail, and, failing that, invest in fit-for-purpose road infrastructure where rail is not an alternative. I thank the minister for taking the grievance.

**MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport)** [9.25 am]: I thank the member for the grievance and I will go through some of the issues raised in a minute. I just want to give members some context. First of all, no government has spent more on regional Western Australian roads than this government. We are spending a record amount. I will look at some point-to-point comparisons. In the last year of the last Liberal–National government, \$937 million was spent on regional roads. This year we have spent \$1.7 billion. We are spending a record amount on regional roads.

In relation to rail lines, I point out to the member that his government sold the rail network. As a result, whenever we want to encourage movement on rail, it proves to be a little difficult because we do not own the rail network. I wish we owned it. I absolutely wish the previous government had never sold it. It was sold for a bargain price and it has changed hands three times since. As a result, we do not control the rail network, yet we do control the road network. The previous government made a mistake in selling the rail network and we now have these issues across the state. I would love to put more freight on rail, but we are dealing with a commercial entity that has its own objectives in relation to profits. That is what private companies do and I understand that. The member is promoting rail, but the previous government sold the rail network and, as a result, the state government has lost control of it.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**Ms R. SAFFIOTI:** The National Party did it together with the Liberal Party, and it was the biggest mistake. That government sold off things like the rail lines and the Midland Railway Workshops and they were massive errors. Rail now comes under a monopoly infrastructure. I wish it was as easy as forcing people onto rail, but the parties have to go into commercial discussions, and, as I said, we are not a party to those discussions because we no longer own the rail network.

We know about the enormous growth of activity in the midwest and what happened more recently because of the iron ore price. Although the price has moderated over recent months, we continue to see a lot of activity. The other key point is that this is happening with not only iron ore, but also other commodities right across the state. I understand the enormous pressure on regional roads because of the level of resources activity. The other point is that much of this activity is being undertaken by more of the mid-sized miners that are basically trying to move a product around. It is a bit different from what some of the big miners like Rio Tinto and BHP do. We are talking about a range of mid-sized miners. One thing we have done is to pass legislation that will make it easier to have maintenance agreements with those mid-sized miners.

It is harsh to say that we have not invested in projects in the midwest and Gascoyne area when we have. We have had a record spend in the midwest. In the midwest and the Gascoyne, there has been a record spend on road maintenance and other projects. I will go through some of the projects that are underway and this will also pick up the Gascoyne region. Indian Ocean Drive is undergoing improvement works, Midland Road is being upgraded, the Oakajee Strategic Industrial Area access road is being built and the Great Northern Highway is being upgraded as well. The other projects recently completed through the midwest include the widening of Brand Highway at the intersection with West Bank Road, Indian Ocean Drive to Yardarino, widening and rehabilitation of Brand Highway and further projects along the Great Northern Highway from Warmun to Mullewa, and other projects. We have undertaken some work on the Geraldton–Mt Magnet Road, spending \$19.2 million to widen the seal to 10 metres between Moonyoonooka and Mullewa and install audible edge linings, which was completed in May 2023. For the current situation, some of the resource companies have contributed about \$5 million over the last three years to road maintenance on the Geraldton–Mt Magnet route.

We know some extreme weather events have impacted the roads, particularly in Mullewa, including 215.8 millimetres of rain recorded in June, exceeding the average of 63.3 millimetres. That has worsened those road conditions; we acknowledge that. Pavement damage in the westbound lane has occurred largely due to water ingress from a creek in the adjacent rail corridor. Major pavement repairs between Mt Magnet and Geraldton were undertaken to address urgent pavement defects on this route. However, heavy vehicle movements have contributed to the deterioration of the holding repairs, so we acknowledge there are some issues in that region. Asphalt profilings have been put in place as a temporary measure, and some localised excavation has been undertaken to help the water drain to the existing gullies, and these works are expected to keep the route serviceable until more permanent repairs can be undertaken once the area is dry. The permanent repairs will address the Mullewa site, as well as three other locations close to Geraldton that are experiencing duress. This work will be undertaken in November this year—I am nearly running out of time!

We are addressing the localised impacts. More generally, can I say, we did try to do some works in October 2022, but the member for Moore said we should not be doing works on the Geraldton–Mt Magnet Road during harvest season, and asked us to delay works along that road. We have prepared a business case for funding for the entire project that highlights the need to upgrade that road. That work is being done and we hope to continue to work with federal agencies to source funding for the upgrade of the entire road.