



Speech by

JAN JARRATT

MEMBER FOR WHITSUNDAY

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BUILDING AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Ms JARRATT (Whitsunday—ALP) (12.41 p.m.): This bill has particular relevance to my electorate as it concerns the requirement to improve fire safety in budget accommodation units typically used by the backpacker market. Airlie Beach has long been recognised as a mecca for backpackers, who come to enjoy the relaxed lifestyle and visit one of the world's great wonders, the Great Barrier Reef. While the Whitsunday area attracts a wide range of visitors and tourist, the backpacker market remains an important component of the area's wealth-generating tourism market. The traditional view of the backpacker is that they do not spend money and contribute little to the local economy. This is not the case. While backpackers do look for economy accommodation, they willingly spend money to participate in social and adventure activities such as sailing, diving, hiking and experiencing the unique activities associated with an island holiday.

Further north in Bowen, backpackers also look for budget accommodation. Some of these visitors come to Bowen as tourists, but many come on a seasonal basis to work in the local horticulture industry, for example, picking tomatoes. While backpackers in both Airlie Beach and Bowen generally look for budget accommodation, this does not mean that they expect to have their safety compromised as a result. The tragic fire in Childers has brought home in the most terrible of circumstances the need to establish fire safety standards in all budget accommodation, regardless of the location or age of the premises.

This bill will achieve a satisfactory standard of fire safety in budget accommodation buildings by requiring the buildings not approved under the Building Code of Australia to comply with prescribed minimum fire safety standards. In addition, it will require owners and occupiers of budget accommodation buildings to prepare and implement a fire safety management plan.

Budget accommodation generally has a higher occupation density than other forms of accommodation, and a large number of older buildings are being used as budget accommodation. Given the nature of the occupation, the age of the buildings, the lack of fire safety facilities and predominant timber construction, fire risk is very high in a large proportion of budget accommodation buildings. Many of these buildings were constructed before the introduction of the Building Act 1975 and only had to comply with the fire safety standards established by individual local governments at that time.

Between 1976 and 1992, the Building Act contained only minimal fire safety standards for new buildings of this type. It was not until 1992, when the Building Code of Australia commenced in Queensland, that new budget accommodation buildings were required to comply with contemporary fire safety standards. Current building and fire safety legislation does not require older buildings to comply with contemporary fire safety standards unless an owner wants to renovate or alter a building, or there is a change of the building's use classification under the Building Code of Australia. However, classifications are broad, and these higher standards would not apply, for example, where a building is converted from hotel accommodation to a backpacker hostel.

The proposed legislation will ensure owners of existing budget accommodation buildings comply with a prescribed fire safety standard which will be called up by regulation. A draft of the proposed fire safety standard was tabled in parliament with the bill. In order to comply with the fire safety standard, building owners will have to ensure their buildings meet a number of minimum standards for fire safety in their buildings. For most buildings, this will only require the installation within one year of smoke

alarms in bedrooms and corridors to provide occupants with early warning of a fire, as well as emergency lighting.

Experience has shown that the lives of people can be saved when smoke from a fire is detected early and they are given substantial warning of an impending fire. That is an important fact. The standards to be called up by this legislation focus on early warning and safe evacuation, not property protection. The fitting of these smoke alarms to existing buildings may be a costly exercise for some building owners. However, this government has ensured that the most cost-effective solutions are available for owners, depending on the size, height and construction materials of the building. The other component for ensuring safe evacuation is the provision of emergency lighting. Obviously, smoke from fires in buildings can disorient people, particularly when they are unfamiliar with their surroundings.

Emergency lighting will be required in all budget accommodation buildings to guide occupants to a safe place in the event of a fire. This lighting can be the existing lighting in the building, which is activated by the smoke alarms in the corridors, or a dedicated system of emergency lighting. The legislation requires owners to comply fully with the standard within three years.

An honourable member: Top idea.

Ms JARRATT: Yes. I am advised that about 400 buildings across the state will require further physical upgrades for such items as emergency escape routes, exit signage, fire extinguishers and hose reels. In addition, all budget accommodation buildings will need to comply with prescribed occupancy rates. Many of these items have been discussed in detail by previous speakers. One of the risks with these types of buildings is the potential for overcrowding. The proposed standard will nominate a minimum floor area of 2.5 square metres per person in each bedroom. This is consistent with the Commonwealth guideline for backpacker hostels, *Building for backpackers*.

An issue also addressed by this fire safety standard is the evacuation of people with a disability. In many cases, full-time carers live on-site with these people and would be available to assist them during an evacuation. However, while the installation of fire safety features will ensure that these buildings meet an acceptable level of fire safety, the ongoing inspection and maintenance by the building owners is a key factor in the continued safety of these buildings.

A fire safety management plan will also have to be prepared by all building owners within one year of this legislation being implemented and be available for inspection by Queensland Fire and Rescue Service officers during a random audit inspection. A plan will include the following components—the allowable number of occupants for the building; the proposed maintenance schedule for the building's prescribed fire safety installations; the evacuation plan for evacuating the building's occupants in the event of a fire in the building; proposed training programs for occupants and persons employed in the building about fire management and prevention and emergency evacuation; and a list of the building's prescribed fire safety installations, together with the brand name and model number of each installation, if applicable.

The Queensland Fire and Rescue Service will continue its role of ensuring budget accommodation buildings remain safe in the event of a fire by carrying out random audit inspections of these buildings. This is a fine piece of legislation that looks at the safety of not just backpackers but all people who live in or spend short times in budget accommodation. I commend the bill to the House.
