



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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APPROPRIATION (PARLIAMENT) BILL; APPROPRIATION BILL (ESTIMATES COMMITTEE F)

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (4.28 pm): I am pleased to participate on the debate on the Estimates Committee F report. In my role as shadow minister for seniors, I am very pleased to comment on this report. I do commend the minister and his staff on their running of the portfolio and their readiness to answer all queries during the estimates hearing.

It is no secret that, as a percentage of population, the number of seniors and retirees is steadily increasing. Queensland has an ageing population, with many people living longer and retiring earlier. This means that there is now a significant number of healthy, active older people who want to continue to contribute to community life and retain their independence and respect while maintaining a decent quality of life.

During the hearing I put several questions to the minister seeking further information on a number of areas, including budget allocations and actual numbers of Queensland seniors accessing cards and services provided by the department. Seniors continue to be a largely untapped and unrecognised resource. Much of what they do goes unnoticed by the greater public. For example, the many grandparents acting as full-time carers for their grandchildren do so quietly and often anonymously, yet they have the same costs and imposts on their time as all other carers and parents.

I note that in answer to a question on respite schemes for grandparents the minister was able to give detail on the \$580,000 allocated to the Seniors Enquiry Line. This statewide service has the responsibility for assisting grandparents to access services and also subsidises their access to a wide variety of activities for young people. It is aimed specifically at providing some respite for grandparents as the primary carers of these children.

Since December 2005 the Time for Grandparents program has made more than 200 referrals and organised overnight camps for grandparents and grandchildren. At these camps, apart from physical activities, I understand grandparents receive advice on the skills necessary and support networks available to help improve their capability to cope as full-time carers. They are a valuable resource.

We are all aware of the contribution our senior citizens have made to the prosperity of this state in the past and the contributions many continue to make in their retirement. We are also very well aware of today's high cost of living and the effects increasing costs and charges can have on the quality of life for our retirees. I have lobbied strongly for support for self-funded retirees. A small proportion of independent retirees may be able to look forward to a financially comfortable retirement but, unfortunately, the majority of independent retirees will not. This group must not be disregarded, and more effort must be put towards encouraging future self-funded retirees. These independent retirees have worked very hard all their lives to provide for their own security in retirement and, as such, are relieving the government of this responsibility. They require every encouragement.

The Office for Seniors is an excellent initiative but it does need more resources. Seniors groups have lobbied for a much broader range of services than this office can encompass. Our Queensland seniors deserve a much higher priority, which further resourcing of this office could deliver. Queensland

provides both the Senior Cards and the Seniors Business Discount Card to its eligible residents. The minister noted during the hearing that this dual-card approach ensures that government concessions are targeted towards this group, and the provision of the cards is a means of saying thank you to seniors. In reply to a question on the use of these cards the minister informed the House that, as of 30 June this year, 471,408 Queenslanders had been issued with the Seniors Card and 53,244 with the Seniors Business Discount Card.

Interestingly, when the baby boomers start turning 60, by 2020, we can expect to have more than one million cardholders in Queensland. I will bring this into perspective. Many members in this House should have an interest in this scheme because, no doubt, many members here will be counted in that one million. The cards allow eligible holders a variety of concessions and discounts on government services, transport, electricity, rates et cetera. The increased allocation of expenditure in the latest budget recognises the increase both in costs and in the number of eligible Queenslanders, but no further government concessions have been put in. It is important that we continue to recognise the social capital that is contributed by older people to the community, including their roles as part-time carers or participants in community organisations and in so many other ways.