



Speech by
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MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE

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GREEN ARMY

Mr PITT (Mulgrave—ALP) (12.17 pm): The Green Army is an election commitment that is being delivered as promised by the Bligh government. It is a \$57 million investment that will employ 3,000 Queenslanders during this term on projects of environmental importance. The Green Army is part of the Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative in which the Queensland government in 2010-11 will invest more than \$106 million to give job related assistance and skills training to maximise labour force participation for an estimated 24,000 long-term unemployed and underemployed people.

Over the past few months the esplanade at Yarrabah has been undergoing an upgrade at the hands of 12 local men and women who joined Queensland's Green Army. Yarrabah has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state and is still reeling from the withdrawal of the Community Development Employment Program—CDEP—last year, so this Green Army project was a real boost for these participants. The state government funds Green Army projects in part to achieve results like the Yarrabah esplanade project—attractive green spaces that draw in locals and visitors and teach them about caring for the environment. The changes that have happened to the site have been great to see. Their efforts—weeding, growing native plants, building garden beds, benches, tables, barbecues and walkways—have been a great benefit to the whole community. The state government also funds these projects so that participants can gain skills and experience while working on the projects.

I was fortunate to be able to be there last week to meet with each of the program's 12 participants as they graduated at the end of their 20 weeks paid work on the project funded to the tune of \$191,980 by the Bligh government. This recent experience completing different landscaping and horticulture tasks, which included learning new skills and how to use tools and other machinery safely, will be a great asset when applying for jobs. They have shown a great attitude to completing the different tasks asked of them and they have also completed some accredited training for the certificate II in horticulture, so heading to TAFE and earning a qualification that will open up more job opportunities is now an option for them too.

The Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council also deserves recognition for supporting, supervising and organising this project. As well as providing the use of vehicles and materials, the council provided great support and supervision for the group, which ensured that the participants gained a lot of valuable skills and understanding and their standard of work was very high. My congratulations go to everyone involved in this project. This group of people should be very proud of their work and have self-confidence as they pursue other employment and training options in the future.

But where will those jobs be? When CDEP came to an abrupt end, much of the workforce was left without employment and almost all existing opportunities in Yarrabah were taken up, thanks to the good work of the Yarrabah transition to employment task force. The federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs—FaHCSIA—provided a subsidy to provide a bus service based around work hours in order to assist workers to access opportunities outside the community. But this service was an interim transition measure and to remain viable it must be subsidised. The withdrawal of the subsidy would make the cost of travel to individuals for work purposes prohibitive.

After positive discussions with the state government, the federal government has extended funding for this service until October 2010. But where to after that? In addition to the funding for the bus subsidy, FaHCSIA provided further funding to the Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council to engage consultants to undertake a transport study regarding the internal and external public transport needs and options for the short, medium and longer term. For several months I have been investigating options for the continuation of the current service to allow time for longer term options in the study to be progressed. I mentioned earlier that Yarrabah lost its CDEP as it was not designated a remote area for the purposes of the program, largely because, when viewed on a map, it appears close to a major centre like Cairns.

Although the distance to be travelled may not be great, Yarrabah is an isolated community. People do not have access to reliable transportation—public or private. I am not aware of too many communities of 4,500 people that have such limited transport options. However, the community's proximity to Cairns may yet be the answer, with a water based transport option a logical long-term option. A ferry service like the one that services Palm Island near Townsville would reduce the transit time from 90 minutes to about 30 minutes and would have the added advantage of opening up economic development opportunities for the community. This is an option that governments of all levels need to consider seriously and I am seeking the assistance of state and federal agencies to contribute to a feasibility study and a cost-benefit analysis to secure Yarrabah's long-term future.

Of course, any talk of a ferry service would first require the necessary infrastructure. A jetty would be a multimillion-dollar proposition. So the discussion around infrastructure and who pays is critical. Then there is the recurrent funding that would be necessary to operate an ongoing ferry service.

Water transport could also allow tourist access to Yarrabah, opening up options for cultural tourism with subsequent jobs growth within the community. It may be that the construction of a jetty must be a development condition of any future tourism accommodation venture that, subject to agreement of traditional owners, would be located on one of Far North Queensland's best beaches.

Yarrabah has a strong pool of skilled workers who only need to be matched with suitable employers. But those jobs are in Cairns, not Yarrabah. If we want to combat high unemployment, we have to provide this basic service to get people to the jobs. The alternative is that they have to move away from the community to be closer to work. We have an education system and training and employment programs like the Green Army getting people ready for the workforce, but we have no service to transport workers to the job market. It is for this reason that passenger transport services must be a priority for Yarrabah in order for inroads to be made into unemployment in the community.