

5. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Planning and Environment

The Bailiff:

We come now to the second question period of the Minister for Planning and Environment.

5.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

Is the Minister satisfied that the Island's current water resources are sufficient to cover anticipated demand in the foreseeable future?

Senator F.E. Cohen (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

I will be making a statement shortly - today - in relation to the Water Resources Law and I am conducting a complete review of the Water Resources Law and propose to bring a new law back to the House as soon as possible that will cover all issues relating to protecting our water resources.

5.2 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I ask the Minister when the property known as La Falaise St. Martin was built? Who were the people who formed the opinion that the property could be demolished and why was the property considered to be of little or no architectural value?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

The property known as La Falaise was built some time after 1911. There is a bit of a history to this. The property was reviewed by the Historic Advisory Panel, who initially thought that it may be connected with the breakwater constructed between 1847 and 1856. There was even a suggestion that it may have been linked to the great Scottish engineer, James Walker. I went to have a look at it with the Director of Planning and I had doubts immediately as to its claimed age. Additional work was carried out and a set of plans was discovered in the archive. The plans are dated, approved 22nd April 1911. The plans include foundation drawings, so clearly, while the plans are labelled "Reconstruction", it was a total rebuild. I looked at the advice given and I was told that the Historic Advisory Panel had regarded this as a marginal case. Having considered the fact the building was built post-1911, and the fact that I did not see it had any architectural, cultural or historic merit, I decided that I would not list it and that I would be prepared to consider its replacement, but only on the basis that it would be replaced with a traditional Jersey house, with very careful detailing of wooden windows, et cetera. It may be interesting to note that I have recently changed the Historic Advisory Panel and formed a new group, the Ministerial Registration and Listing Advisory Group, which significantly increases the heritage advice available to me.

Deputy G.C.L. Baudains of St. Clement:

I believe my question has just been answered, Sir.

5.3 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

In respect of the development of Field 848 and adjacent fields in St. Lawrence, could the Minister confirm whether a full ecological and environmental assessment has been undertaken on the marsh and in addition, of any impact of the development on groundwater levels as opposed to surface water flooding matters?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

As I mentioned earlier, this is the subject of a current application and shortly will be the subject of a debate. I can assure everyone that all matters in relation to environmental impact and the water flooding risk are being very carefully looked at and I have asked for further information from the engineers who were commissioned by the developers to prepare the assessments.

5.4 The Deputy of St. John:

I understand that the Island Plan is currently being reviewed. Could the Minister indicate as to when the new Plan is likely to be published and within it, would the Minister consider creating a category of land zoning specifically designated for sheltered housing for the elderly?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

The review of the Island Plan is a key element of the Strategic Plan. We would be moving forward very shortly but we will be reviewing sections of the Island Plan rather than the whole document. As far as sheltered housing is concerned for the elderly, this is a very important matter. It is a matter I regularly discuss with the Minister for Housing. We are building-up a policy together in relation to this and we will be looking very shortly at approaching the Parishes to ask the Parishes to propose suitable sites. I am very keen to give the Parishes the opportunity of delivering sheltered homes at the most economical cost possible and the best way of that being achieved is by the Parishes selecting the sites themselves but I will be working very closely on this, as I have said, with the Minister for Housing.

5.5 Deputy A. Breckon:

I would like to ask the Minister if he would care to comment on whether he thinks that the new hotel and the block of flats on the Waterfront deliver world-class architecture on the Waterfront which result in pride and inspiration for the Island.

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I have very little confidence in the architectural merits of many of the buildings currently on the Waterfront. That is precisely why I have spent so much time looking at ways to try and improve matters. I think with the announcement that I am going to make shortly you will see that hopefully those are the bad old days and we will moving to very much better buildings and I hope it will place Jersey with those buildings on the world architectural stage.

5.6 Deputy J.A.N. Le Fondré:

Speaking in general terms to the Minister, and given the reservations of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services as expressed earlier this morning in respect of parking provision, for example, on H2 sites, would the Minister agree that such provision should be reviewed and preferably increased on sites where an application has not yet been determined and for also other forthcoming projects?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Yes, I most definitely would agree with that. My design policies, which are now in version 5, cover this very clearly. I am very keen to see that future developments have garages for all homes and proper and adequate parking provision. However, I must stress that when I am dealing with applications that are current and that came in before the implementation of my new design policies, I am really unable to move the goalposts. I am doing everything I possibly can

to try and improve issues like design in relation to schemes that are already in progress and to improve parking but it is very much a matter of negotiation. But I can assure you, on fresh schemes, this will be something we will be looking at very carefully and ensuring significant improvement in this area and in many others; design, space, space about and size of rooms being particularly important issues.

5.7 Deputy S.C. Ferguson:

With regard to sheltered housing, would the Minister not agree that it is not best sociological practice to isolate the elderly in geriatric ghettos? Sheltered housing should be part of a balanced development with a wider age range. Will he be applying guidelines to make sure this happens?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I am afraid I am not an expert on the sociological implications of sheltered housing. All I can say is that I will be working and working very closely with the Minister for Housing to ensure that we deliver the best possible sheltered homes as quickly as possible at the best possible and most affordable price but I am unable to say, at this stage, what the exact structure of those sheltered housing developments will be.

5.8 Deputy C. F. Labey of Grouville:

Given the great concern with both the aesthetic and possible health issues pertaining to the telephone masts, can the Minister confirm if there is going to be a co-ordinated approach to granting applications to existing, current and future telephone companies?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

I think that the health issues have been resolved pretty clearly. The ICNIR (International Conference on Non Ionising Radiation) limits show if transmissions are at the ICNIR limits, it is a safe transmission. However, we are dealing with transmission levels of a tiny fraction over the ICNIR maximums, so I do not believe that there is a significant health risk in relation to these masts. There is a significant aesthetic risk in relation to these masts, however. I have taken an approach recently that encourages mast applicants to favour wooden telegraph poles hollowed out, so that the aerial itself is concealed and wherever possible, I will be encouraging that type of mast to be used. There are many issues relating to masts, most particularly how to most effectively encourage mast-sharing and I am endeavouring, as much as possible, to try and limit the number of new structures. I have, however, made it very clear within my department that I do not wish to pass new legislation.

5.9 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Given the anecdotal information that there is a surplus of flats, some of which have gone to speculative buyers and which have remained, therefore, unoccupied, would the Minister inform the House how he balances supply and demand, so we do not get into another situation where, helter-skelter, a glut of a certain kind of housing is created while pressure is put on other parts of the housing market?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

The Planning for Homes document clearly covers the requirements for new housing over the next 5 years. This was only published in 2005. At the end of the day though, a great deal of this sort of control is down to market forces and developers will largely only develop flats and houses that they consider they have a ready market for. We can see in the Planning for Homes

document very clearly where the demand is and we can see that, by and large, with the present sites approved in general that we have sufficient homes approved for the next 5 years.

5.10 Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade:

At the risk of labouring the point, could the Minister assure Members that he will, in short time in conjunction with TTS (Transport and Technical Services), devise a mechanism for analysing the effect of increased traffic emanating from new developments in the west and use this information prior to granting planning permission?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Yes, I can give such an assurance but the model is very much something that is run by TTS but I know this is something that concerns the Minister for Transport greatly and I am sure this will be progressed to the Connétable's satisfaction in the coming months.

5.11 The Deputy of St. Peter:

Is the Minister aware of the problems associated in the St. Ouen's Bay area with regards to pollution caused by the airport fire ground, namely Pfos (perfluoro-octane sulfonate), and if he is aware, would it be possible for an environmental assessment to be made on the effect on the area in conjunction with both Health and the Ministry of Transport and Technical Services?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

No, I am not aware of the details of this situation although I am aware of the generality. I think it would be far more sensible if I provided a detailed response to the Deputy in the coming days after I have obtained the necessary information from my department.

5.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Notwithstanding his answer when he suggested that the Planning for Homes document 2005 was providing sufficient sites for sufficient houses for the population, does the Minister not accept that the recent increase in house prices - especially in 3-bedroom houses and above - is inevitable given that as the economy recovers, there will be increased demand and he is unlikely to meet that demand and keep house price inflation down?

Senator F.E. Cohen:

The provision of 3-bedroom homes is very clearly an important issue and there is considerable pressure to provide more 3-bedroom homes. However, at the end of the day, it is necessary to ensure that applications for houses have the least damage inflicted upon the environment, are as well-designed as possible and provide space about, good quality of design and local relevance in their design and those are the areas that I am concentrating on. But, generally, it is the developers who will drive forward developments either quickly or slowly, as they see demand.

5.13 Connétable D.J. Murphy of Grouville:

Some 3 months ago, I asked a question of the Minister with regard to people putting in applications on properties for building where the owner had not given his consent. He promised me he would look into it at that time. Can you tell me what steps he has taken to ensure that the owners are, in fact, made part of the application process? Thank you.

Senator F.E. Cohen:

Other than exceptional circumstances - and I mean very exceptional circumstances - I have given very clear instructions to the department that they are not to progress any applications that do not have the consent of the landowner and I have been very firm on this.

The Bailiff:

That concludes the second question period with notice.