

24 June 2009

ADJOURNMENT

Lindsay Electorate: Penrith City Council - E-waste

Mr BRADBURY (Lindsay) — (7:34 PM) — I acknowledge a number of representatives of the Penrith City Council. In the gallery this evening we have the Mayor, Councillor Jim Aitken OAM, the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Ross Fowler OAM, Councillor Karen McKeown, General Manager Alan Stoneham, Ruth Goldsmith and Eric Weller. I take this opportunity to congratulate Penrith City Council on winning the Women in Local Government category of the 2009 National Awards for Local Government, which was officially presented earlier this evening. Penrith City Council has a fine record of women in leadership roles in local government, with Councillor McKeown, a former deputy mayor, now holding the position of President of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Local Government Women's Association. Councillor Jacqui Greenow, a former president herself, and Penrith council staff members Bev Spearpoint and Helen Cooper are also on the executive of that association. Councillor McKeown is also one of Penrith council's sustainability champions and I know that sustainability is a high priority for Penrith council.

One of the biggest sustainability challenges we face is coping with the mountains of high-tech equipment that are constantly churned through homes, businesses and government agencies—our e-waste. Computers are a part of our everyday lives, but if we do not manage the way we dispose of them they will become hazardous waste products that will stay with us for generations. The metals used to make computer chips, the acids in batteries and the chemicals in monitors are all potentially dangerous to the environment if not disposed of properly. It is the dilemma of the 21st century household or business. Everyone has an unused monitor or computer tucked away in a cupboard or storeroom or, worse, on its way to landfill where it poses a major threat of contamination to the soil and groundwater.

The scale of the turnover in ICT equipment is enormous. The Gershon review estimates that the Commonwealth alone replaces 100,000 desktop and notebook computers each year and there are literally tens of millions of monitors, keyboards, printers and CPUs in Australian homes and businesses.

At a public hearing held today by the Joint Standing Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, the Australian National Audit Office confirmed that only 16 Commonwealth agencies, around a quarter, have product stewardship provisions in place in their contracts with their ICT suppliers. Stewardship clauses enable agencies to hand disused equipment back to the supplier who is then under an obligation to dispose of or recycle it responsibly.

There needs to be national coordination of the way we manage our e-waste, and I acknowledge the work that is currently being done at state and federal levels through the Environment Protection and Heritage Council to put together a national framework for product stewardship, which will be finalised in November this year. This will divert disused government computers away from landfill and to a more sustainable and productive use.

There are innovative and successful programs throughout the community that could be incorporated into this national framework, like the programs run by Planet Ark or the Victorian Byteback scheme. There are also community level programs like the one run in my electorate by the local Schools Industry Partnership. The Schools Industry Partnership operates a successful IT and education program steered by Ian Palmer and Richard Baczelis. The program sources disused computers from schools, Penrith council and local businesses and the computers are then refurbished by local school students as part of their vocational education IT courses. The students then install software and roll out the computers to council run childcare centres, giving preschool age children the opportunity to experience computer based learning.

Under a nationwide program built around the template developed by the Schools Industry Partnership, this could be expanded to roll out computers to neighbourhood centres, not-for-profit community groups and families and individuals in need, because despite the prevalence of computers in our community there are still those for whom purchasing a new computer is beyond their reach.

These refurbished computers could be provided at a low cost with that cost possibly even offset by the 50 per cent education tax refund. There is also an opportunity to upgrade these refurbished computers at a very low cost so that they can also be capable of acting as digital televisions by including an LCD monitor and digital television tuner card. Providing digital television tuners could also be part of the government's approach to ensuring that disadvantaged individuals and groups are not left behind when we all switch over to digital in 2013.

Our old ICT equipment will leave a legacy. We have the choice to decide whether that legacy is one of improper disposal and contamination or one that uses that equipment to provide opportunities to access modern technology for the most disadvantaged in our community. I look forward to the outcome of the planning of the national framework and I hope that we are able to plug into successful programs like the schools industry partnership to make the most of our e-waste.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms AE Burke)—And well done to the Penrith council, who are represented here tonight.