

Fight over development credentials

Mark Beyer & Rebecca Lawson

RETAIL trading hours and major project development emerged as the top business issues in the first week of the state election campaign, with Labor and the Liberal opposition both claiming they have a better track record.

Liberal leader Colin Barnett has promoted the establishment of industrial estates at Maitland in the Pilbara and Oakajee in the Mid West as key to the development of downstream processing industries in Western Australia, which has long been the 'holy grail' for WA's mining-focused economy.

"There is a glaring need for a world-class industrial estate in the Pilbara," Mr Barnett told *WA Business News*.

He also believes that astute management of the gas industry should give WA an advantage on gas pricing.

"There is no reason why you could not have a differential between world prices and domestic prices," he said.

State Development Minister Eric Ripper believes his political rival is out of touch, arguing that the cost of developing an industrial estate at Maitland would be more than \$1 billion.

Mr Ripper said another problem with Maitland was that the nearest port site was West Intercourse Island, which would be difficult to develop because it had a lot of rock art.

He also noted that industrial sites

are still available on the Burrup Peninsula, adjacent to the Burrup Fertilisers plant.

Mr Barnett agrees there is space for a handful of new projects on the Burrup, but says they could be full within the next 10 years.

"I'm talking about long-term development over decades to come," he said.

Mr Barnett's advocacy of the Maitland industrial estate is at odds with Woodside Petroleum's environmental review for its Pluto gas project, which is proceeding on the Burrup.

"Maitland Estate does not represent a technically or commercially viable option," the Woodside review stated.

Mr Ripper also seized on this week's commitment by the Gorgon project partners to build a domestic gas plant. He said this provided vindication of the government's domestic gas reservation policy.

Meanwhile, the state's major business lobby groups have expressed disappointment at the lack of support for wide-ranging deregulation of retail trading hours.

Premier Alan Carpenter has promised "modest reform" of shopping hours if Labor wins the election.

He said he had backed away from his previous support for full deregulation after consulting retailers, employee groups and unions.

Under Labor's scheme, weeknight trading would be extended to 7pm and

electrical and furniture stores would be able to open on Sundays from 11am until 5pm.

Special shopping districts also would be created in Joondalup, Midland and Armadale to allow for Sunday and public holiday trading from 11am to 5pm.

Independent Grocers Association president John Cummings, who led the campaign against deregulation, welcomed the latest stance.

However the Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA said it was disappointed the premier had bowed to minority groups.

"The ALP proposes to add further rules and complications to an already unwieldy and confusing system," CCI executive director industry policy Trevor Lovelle said.

"CCI's research shows that WA consumers want extended trading hours and that deregulation across the nation has seen better business for retailers and lower prices for customers."

The Property Council of Australia said it was "appalled" by both the major parties' refusal to take leadership on the issue.

"The State ALP and the Liberal party are denying WA consumers the right to buy cheaper goods when and where they like," executive director of the Council's WA arm, Joe Lenzo, said.



INDUSTRIAL PLAN: Colin Barnett has promoted the establishment of industrial estates at Maitland in the Pilbara and Oakajee in the Mid West. **Photo:** Grant Currall