

Leases - Macklin short on guarantees

The Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin has failed to give guarantees on housing during a visit to Central Australia to discuss town leasing.

Speaking at Ntaria (Hermannsburg) and Lajamanu in July, Ms Macklin was asked to explain why traditional owners and residents are being forced to accept long-term leases over their communities in order to receive new housing works.

The Minister was scheduled to also visit Yuendumu but cancelled at the last moment.

The three communities - Ntaria, Lajamanu and Yuendumu - are the only ones in Central Australia to be offered funding under the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program (SIHIP).

The \$30 million SIHIP funds will be used to fix up existing infrastructure, construct new infrastructure, refurbish old houses and for SIHIP administration costs as well as the building of new houses.

Conditions

The catch is that no building or renovation will start until the Aboriginal landowners and affected local residents agree to sign over all the housing in the community to the government for 40 years, or to sign over the whole of the community in a lease lasting a longer period of time.

But while Aboriginal residents are subjected to this clause, it is not being applied to all construction. New Australian Government offices and houses for their staff have been built in the three communities without a lease being signed.

This has left locals wondering why the same rules are not applied to everyone ie: no lease - no funding for new buildings or homes.

Housing needs for the life of the lease?

One resident, who attended the Lajamanu meeting asked Ms Macklin, "If

we sign for a 60 year lease are they going to be building through that lease? Might be 60 or 80 years."

Ms Macklin's response suggested more houses would be built through the life of the lease, but didn't include a guarantee they would or that a new government or minister would be obliged to keep such a commitment.

"Can I make it clear we have the money to build houses now," Ms Macklin replied. "We don't have to wait until the end of the lease.

"We'll start building houses making sure that over the next 40 or 60 years more houses are built or repaired," Ms Macklin said.

Community involvement

At the Lajamanu meeting, Minister Macklin was asked: "Who have the power, the government or the Aboriginal people? Who is going to have the power for all that in the community?"

Ms Macklin didn't commit to community members

having any real power over the development and maintenance of houses. She replied: "It's important to remember that there will be a lot of consultation and the power and the responsibility will be shared between the government and individual people and the community. It's important to remember that as part of the lease there will be lots of consultation about the design of the houses".

Why is a long-term lease over housing needed?

The Minister was also asked why a lease was

needed when new housing was constructed in the past without one.

"The reason is you didn't end up with the government looking after the houses," she said.

"The lease is an agreement between the people and the government to build houses and look after them for the next 40 years. In the past no one took that responsibility.

While the Commonwealth is holding up building houses for Aboriginal people - insisting that they first have to be given a lease - they are happy to go ahead and build lost of new office buildings and staff houses.

"This is all about making it clear that it's the government's job to keep the houses in order."

She attempted to reassure traditional owners that they have nothing to fear from the leases.

"This is not about taking ownership of the land.

"The title stays with you.

"We will negotiate this lease with you.

"We want an agreement with you about the conditions attached to the lease."

What are the new rules? Who will fix up the houses? What about rent?



Above: The Minister talks at a meeting on leases at Hermannsburg west of Alice Springs assisted by interpreting from Alison Hunt.

The Australian Government will hand responsibility for maintenance of the houses to the NT Government's Territory Housing under a long-term lease and management of rental agreements.

Although the NT Government has promised to supply the CLC with details of rental charges and the terms and conditions to be included in rental agree-

thing we can talk about," Ms Macklin replied.

"Very happy to talk about that."

The NLC region

There are nine communities in the NLC region which will receive SIHIP funding.

The NLC conducted consultations for four of those communities last year - being Wadeye, Maningrida, Gunbulanya and Galiwinku, and approved the leases at a Full Council meeting on 1 February 2009.

The NLC is presently processing the remaining five of those communities this year - being Yirrkala, Gapuwiyak, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Milingimbi.

Those consultations have commenced and will be completed later this year.

For more information about SIHIP visit: www.housing.nt.gov.au/remotehousing/sihp

ments with tenants, the Land Council has to date not received this information.

As Land Rights News goes to print, community members are still being asked to accept a lease without knowing exactly what doing so will mean.

A swimming pool?

At least one person attending the Lajamanu meeting was ready to move to the negotiation stage.

"Can we get a swimming pool too?" they asked.

"That's certainly some-