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A 'FERRY' TALE ENDING FOR COMMUTERS?

Station Pier at Port Melbourne could be the docking point for Bellarine commuters

By Martelle Love

CRUISING across the bay to Melbourne by ferry could soon be an option for Bellarine commuters wanting to avoid congested road and rail routes.

Plans for a daily commuter ferry service between Portarlington and Melbourne are on track, despite the delayed release of the state government's Portarlington Safe Harbour Plan.

John Rae is secretary of the Bellarine Ferry Group, a group of community members who are driving the ferry service proposal. Rae said that while Parks Victoria had confirmed that a ferry berth was included in the plan, they were hoping for further details when the plan was released.

"Our anticipation is that the plan will be released at the end of August. We have invited Member for Western Victoria Gail Tierney onto our

committee and we are waiting for a reply at this stage. She has given us fabulous support for the ferry proposal and is assisting us in our endeavours to undertake a feasibility study," said Rae.

He said the group was currently seeking funds to have a feasibility study carried out across the Bellarine Peninsula to establish how many people travelled daily to Melbourne.

"We are currently talking to both government and a commercial company regarding gaining the funds for that purpose. The feasibility study is vital for us to complete, so we can get a real picture of the potential for the ferry service," he said.

Key to the ferry proposal is the provision and timing of a berthing facility at Portarlington.

"One of the reasons the last ferry failed was because there were no adequate berthing facilities

available at Portarlington. We absolutely need that berth and we are thrilled that it is included in the Safe Harbour Plan. This eliminates the uncertainty of the service. Reliability is crucial to consumer confidence," Rae said.

The Bellarine Ferry Group intends to send a representative to Brisbane and Sydney to investigate the ferry services to these two cities. The plan is for the Bellarine ferry to run a commuter service three times a day, during both the morning and evening peak periods, with the possibility of additional tourist services. It is anticipated that the service itself would be put out to tender by the state government.

The anticipated travel time between Portarlington and Station Pier is 42 minutes, with a two minute walk to the light rail and a 12 minute ride to the Melbourne CBD. This compares to an hour and 45

minutes to two hours by road in peak hour.

One manufacturer of a vessel suitable for the commuter ferry service is planning to test the bay waters soon.

Gary Ashton of Hastings-based Mariah Hovercraft Australia said they were currently building a large hovercraft for export and planned to trial their vessels in the bay before Christmas. He said the hovercraft could certainly operate as a ferry on Port Phillip Bay and cater for the route from Portarlington to Melbourne.

"It's a 20 metre craft - an extremely large vessel which seats 80 to 100 people and can operate in all weather," he said.

In the meantime, Rae said a ferry service might be introduced as part of the Portarlington Mussel Festival in January 2009, which attracts up to 15,000 people.

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