

Works Commence on the Great Southern Rail Trail Extension

The first stage of works on the extension of the Great Southern Rail Trail (GSRT) commenced last week. This project has been planned for since the former Council resolved to extend the GSRT at its March 2017 meeting, a decision which was reinforced when the former Council adopted the extension as part of its suite of Priority Projects at its July 2017 meeting.

While this was a project identified and championed by the dismissed Councillors, significant progress has been made since the South Gippsland Shire Council Administrators reaffirmed the GSRT extension as a Priority Project at the September 2019 Council Meeting.

The contract to remove the obsolete tracks and sleepers from Leongatha to Nyora was recently awarded to local company BJ's Earthmoving. The contractor spent a few days early last week setting up its work site and removed the first of the tracks and sleepers on Thursday morning.

The extension of the GSRT between Leongatha and Nyora does not compete with or compromise a return of passenger rail if this became a priority of the Victorian State Government in the future. The advice Council has received is that due to the standard and condition of the current track, it would have to be replaced in its entirety to enable the return of a passenger train service. While a passenger service connecting the region to Melbourne would be wonderful, the State Government has no known intention of returning a passenger service to this region at this time. A passenger rail service has not operated in South Gippsland since 1993. Council being offered a lease for 18 years is further evidence that the return of a passenger rail service is at least a generation away.

Council commissioned a contamination report prior to works commencing. The report confirmed that sleepers and rails were fine to remove. It also established that the rail ballast was best left in place. Soils along the track are suitable to remain on site for the proposed public open space land use (i.e.: as a rail trail). Once the rails and sleepers have been removed it is anticipated that works will commence on constructing the surface to extend the GSRT when the outcome of the grant funding submissions is known.

It is anticipated that the Leongatha to Nyora extension will cost approximately \$6M. It is expected that the project will be jointly funded by Council and the Victorian Government through its grants programs. Council currently has two applications for funding pending. Applications have been submitted for the Leongatha to Korumburra section through Regional Development Victoria (RDV) and the Korumburra to Nyora section through Sport and Recreation Victoria (SRV). It is hoped that the outcome of the RDV application will be known in the coming weeks. The outcome of the SRV application is anticipated in May.

Council's vision is to turn this currently neglected, weed-infested strip of land into an economic driver that adds to our growing tourism economy. It will also create greater amenity for our residents and provide safe linkages between many of our towns. Council has access to

independent expenditure data which can track local and visitor expenditure. After completing the missing link on the GSRT between Koonwarra and Meeniyar there was an increased visitor spend of 15 per cent in the following peak season across these two towns. The Economic Impact Assessment and Cost Benefit Analysis completed by SGS Economics and Planning shows that the extension from Leongatha to Nyora is a sound investment for the community.

Some facts:

- The Victorian Government has no intention to return passenger rail services to South Gippsland in the foreseeable future. Passenger rail services ceased in 1993.
- Any suggestion that the creation of a tourist railway will pre-empt the return of a passenger rail service are false.
- There seems to be some in the community who believe that there is a choice between a train and a rail trail. This is simply incorrect. The only choice is between a neglected, weedy strip of land and a rail trail that will be used by locals and tourists alike.
- VicTrack has leased the former rail corridor to South Gippsland Shire Council for a period of 18 years specifically for the land to be used as a rail trail between Leongatha and Nyora.
- The lease does not permit the use of the corridor for a tourist rail.
- VicTrack has advised that if the land is required for transport purposes in the future, the agreement will be revisited.
- Any suggestion that the existing rail infrastructure is in a good state of repair is incorrect, as evidenced by the demise of the previous tourist train.
- Removing the redundant rail infrastructure and constructing a rail trail will not create a barrier to the return of a passenger rail service in the future.
- The Great Southern Rail Trail extension is supported by, amongst others: South Gippsland Shire Council, Bass Coast Shire Council, Cardinia Shire Council, Casey City Council, Wellington Shire Council, Korumburra Business Association, Korumburra Round Table, Leongatha Business Association, Loch Community Development Association, Destination Gippsland, Regional Development Victoria and VicTrack.

PR2513 27/2/20