

Slow and steady start for transport group

MAKING a big impact on the next election cycle is the main focus of the new South and West Gippsland Transport Group which got down to business at its initial steering committee meeting last Thursday, June 23.

The meeting, held at the Palace Hotel, Lang Lang, was attended by eight people representing local government, business and communities from Casey, Cardinia and South Gippsland.

It is planned to extend membership to Bass Coast and Baw Baw shires, and to the business sector across south and west Gippsland over the next few months.

South Gippsland Shire Council was represented by Cr Jennie Deane and Cr Jeanette Harding, also members of the board of South East Transport Services (SEATS), with Cr Colin Ross, Cardinia Shire Council and President of the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, also in attendance.

The meeting decided

that the group would focus on the urgent need for improved connectivity within Gippsland, and between south and west Gippsland and the metropolitan area in all forms of public transport.

Members outlined the significant problems being faced by people commuting to work from this area caused by road congestion and lack of appropriate public transport, and the increasing needs of business and industry for affordable freight services in the light of increasing oil prices.

The group will research community needs and develop a business case for cost effective transport solutions and an integrated approach to public transport, freight, road and rail links. It will promote investment in such links and act as a strong advocate to governments.

State and local governments have already recognised improved transport as a key priority for Gippsland in the Gippsland Regional

Plan, developed by the Gippsland Local Government Network, Regional Development Australia and the RDV.

The new Transport Group will build on this work, including the additional areas of Cardinia and Casey in its plan.

"The use of taxis, problems with bus timetabling and connections and several other pressing issues were discussed again but it has been recognised that the most important thing for us is to be ready to make an impact on the next election cycle in 12 to 18 months' time." Chairman for the group, Andrew McEwen said.

He said the steering committee had resolved that it was important to define the charter and objectives first as a basis for the operation of the organisation.

The group agreed to meet regularly to further develop its the charter and prepare an initial case for greater transport investments in south and west Gippsland and for the return of the rail to Leongatha and possibly

to Port Anthony at Barry's Beach.

"All members of the steering committee believe that it is essential that we develop a credible and professional group that is prepared to work constructively with all stakeholders and local, state and federal Governments to ensure that we have equitable access, mobility and connectivity both within Gippsland and between Gippsland and Melbourne."

He said that the group had agreed to undertake research into the key needs and issues, as basis for developing a clear plan of action.

"It will work to achieve its aims through engaging with local communities and developing strong partnerships with key stakeholders including industry and business organisations, and government organisations at all levels."

He said the group would be working on developing a 'campaign' strategy and communication strategy in the next few months.

It is intended to convene another public meeting when these projects are completed and formally present the proposed charter, business case and campaign strategy to the wider community.

"It is essential that we have a long-term, 20-year plan for connectivity and mobility given the challenges of rapid growth in SE corridor of Melbourne, imminent peak oil and climate change. We have to get out of reactive planning and genuinely address the long term challenges for the prosperity of south and west Gippsland."

Mr McEwen said public transport gripes would also be addressed but the focus now will be firmly on establishing a strong platform.

The next meeting of the steering committee will be held on Thursday, July 28 in the back room of the Palace Hotel, Lang Lang.

If people are interested in being involved they can contact Andrew McEwen on 0488 242478.