

Train lobby group forms

By Jane Ross

A NEW committee has been formed to lobby for the return of rail services to South Gippsland.

Up to 40 people, including South Gippsland Shire mayor, Cr Warren Raabe, three council colleagues and director of development services, Phil Stone, attended a meeting in Lang Lang last Thursday night.

Those present formed the South West Gippsland Public Transport Users Group.

Cr Jeanette Harding and Cr Jennie Deane are on it, as is Leongatha train enthusiast Max Semken.

Mr Semken has been running a one-man return-the-train campaign for years and is thrilled that others are now interested in the value of having a passenger rail service.

He said he wanted to be part of the new lobby group because "I haven't fought all this time not to be".

The turnout of South Gippsland councillors reflected the shire's sustainability strategy which advocates for the return of rail.

Cr Raabe said he saw the issue as one of public transport overall, not just rail.

"The metropolitan train system is bursting at the seams; it's sardine material. The Monash Freeway is a disaster. Trying to get from South Gippsland to Melbourne or back in peak hour is very difficult and very slow," he said.

But, there was not "a huge push" from the community on the issue of public transport and with no representatives at the meeting from Bass Coast

or Casey councils and only one from Cardinia, Cr Raabe said that indicated their views.

Bass MLA, Ken Smith was there but Cr Raabe said he spoke in "weasel words", while Parliamentary secretary for transport, Edward O'Donohue failed to show up.

Former South Gippsland Shire director of sustainability, Andrew McEwen, attended and had agreed to act as interim group spokesman.

An expert in sustainability issues, Mr McEwen said increasing energy costs would become a major issue for South Gippsland's dairy industry.

The New Zealand dairy giant, Fortuna he continued, had just switched all its export traffic off roads and onto rail to remain cost competitive and reduce its carbon footprint.

And a fast link to towns like Korumburra would allow people to commute to Melbourne, revitalising such communities and taking growth pressures off the city.

Providing a link to Port Anthony at Barry's Beach, ensuring viability of tourism in an era of increasing petrol prices and addressing the challenges of peak oil were other issues canvassed.

Mr McEwen said the group would meet soon to form a charter and state what it wants to achieve.

Former Gippsland West Independent politician, Susan Davies spoke at the meeting.

Ms Davies, who now lives in Outtrim and is involved in Wonthaggi's annual Energy Innovation Festival, said she had been invited to address the gathering because of the efforts she had made in 2000-01 to

persuade the then Bracks Government to hold to its 1999 election promise to reopen the rail service.

Ms Davies said yesterday that she was "really impressed" to see four South Gippsland councillors at the Lang Lang meeting, because at the turn of this century, neither South Gippsland Council nor any other local Members of Parliament had spoken out in favour of the rail service.

Much effort went into having the rail line bridges at Leongatha and Korumburra, plus the overpass at Loch and Bena re-opened so that the tourist train remained viable.

But the line infrastructure between Cranbourne and Nyora has disintegrated.

"My view is when the line was closed in 1992, the Kennett Government made an undertaking to maintain the line at freight quality. It didn't do that," she said.

"Once a line isn't used, it deteriorates very quickly."

Therefore the cost of replacing it skyrockets.

Ms Davies said she still holds that governments have a responsibility to think ahead and invest in the future.

"I've seen no indication from this (state) government that it's interested (in the rail line) at all."

She said another study in 2008, conducted with "rudimentary community consultation", concluded there was low demand for a passenger train.

"The upshot was an improvement in the bus service."

It is Ms Davies' view that a passenger train between Lang Lang and Cranbourne would be a good compromise.