

## Westgate Punters group – response to Eddington transport strategy

The Westgate Punters group was formed in 2006 to campaign for the continuation of a commuter bike ferry service underneath Westgate Bridge between Spotswood and Fisherman's Bend. The group believes the commuter service has benefits in terms of health, safety, public transport, tourism and the environment.

The Westgate Punters are heartened by Recommendation 7 of the Eddington report, New cross city cycle links. The seven projects, totalling \$60million, acknowledge the cycling boom across Melbourne. The report says that these projects support 'the strong growth in commuter cycling (especially in the west)'.

The Westgate Punters believe an eighth project would go a long way towards completing the report's view that 'a number of small scale projects would significantly improve east-west cycling connectivity'.

This eighth project is the return of the commuter bike ferry service underneath Westgate Bridge between Spotswood and Fisherman's Bend.

While a weekend service has run for over a decade, the commuter service was only trialled from 5 October 2005 to 2 June 2006. The trial was funded by a number of agencies, including Bicycle Victoria (BV) and local councils. The trial was discontinued due to perceived low patronage. According to BV the trial generated usage rates below 25 per cent, with a monthly average high of 61 passengers per day in March 2006.

(See: <http://www.bv.com.au/bikes-and-riding/11690/>)

The Westgate Punters group revived the commuter service for the Ride To Work days of 2006 and 2007 as part of its campaign for a return of a regular service.

A total of 256 passengers used the bike punt on Ride To Work Day on 17 October 2007, an increase from the 2006 figure of 215 and 2005's 104 (the launch of the trial).

The group's 2007 survey showed that 136 cyclists used the punt on the morning of Ride to Work Day between 6am and 9am and 120 returned between 3pm and 7pm.

The Ride to Work Day cyclists were from 22 suburbs, with most from Newport and Williamstown. Others pedalled from Footscray, Altona, Altona Meadows, and Werribee in the west, and also from St Kilda, Port Melbourne, Elwood, Brighton, and Northcote. One cyclist rode from Mt Waverley to North Altona, via the punt.

Cyclists said they would be happy to pay, on average, \$3 per trip, and would use a commuter service 4.6 times per week.

Collectively, the cyclists said they would use the weekday punt 660 times per week, which is just over 50 per cent of the punt's maximum capacity.

Given that a majority of the traffic is in one direction it essentially indicates that the punt would run at capacity from the peak end.

The Westgate Punters believe that these figures and recent Bicycle Victoria and VicRoads surveys showing the increasing numbers of commuter cyclists in the west, are strong arguments for the return of the weekday commuter ferry service.

The Bicycle Victoria Super Tuesday count of March 2008 showed 582 cyclists used the narrow and dangerous Shepherd Bridge on Footscray Road, compared to 353 in 2007. It is unknown how many of these cyclists rode from Spotswood and beyond, literally passing the jetty of the bike punt service that is opposite Scienceworks.

VicRoads figures, tabled in Parliament by the Minister for Roads and Ports on Tuesday 19 June 2008, show an average increase of Footscray Road cyclists of 14%, with increases during summer peak hour of 37% (mornings) and 29% (afternoons). Overall peak hour increases were 21% (mornings) and 20% (afternoons).

While the Westgate Punters are very pleased that there are plans to widen Shepherd Bridge and improve cycling safety to that bridge, it still believes there is a strong need for the commuter punt, especially for those cycling to and from the inner bayside suburbs.

(See <http://www.bv.com.au/change-the-world/40688/>: '21 May 08 Bicycle Victoria has learnt that the recent \$28.8M 'Keeping Melbourne Moving' funding announcement ...not only includes the WestGate Link from the Stony Creek Backwash up to the Shepherd Bridge (on Footscray Rd) but will also include widening the path over the bridge itself.')

The owner and operator of the Westgate Punt service has informed the group that a commuter service would cost \$170,000 per year. (This includes fuel, maintenance, wages, berthing fees, etc.)

The Eddington report calls for 'a long-term strategic program for walking and cycling, supported by significant and reliable recurrent funding...located within one central department or agency'.

Funding of \$170,000 per year would ensure the return of the commuter punt. As patronage of the commuter punt increases, that figure of \$170,000 per year could decrease. The commuter punt is a form of public transport and as such deserves to be subsidised.

Commenting on the closure of the trial in June 2006 General Manager of Bicycle Victoria, Mr Harry Barber, said 'One day there will be a bicycle ferry under the Westgate Bridge that will be heavily used, but this trial has shown that such a day has not yet arrived.'

The Westgate Punters group believes that such a day has now arrived.

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