

RiverCat Stays for Now

Monday, 22 June 2009

Rivercat Stays – For
Now – Future Depends on Us

The Parramatta Chamber of Commerce congratulates all those who worked vigorously to secure the NSW Government's Budget announcement that the Parramatta Rivercat will be retained at least for the next two years. Leading the charge since the 2007 Walker Report into Sydney Ferries recommended axing the service was Chamber Immediate Past President Mr Roman Dechnicz, State MP for Parramatta Ms Tanya Gadiel, the Councillors and staff of Parramatta City Council, the Parramatta Advertiser, the Parramatta Sun and a host of others.

This win however does come with a short window of opportunity to secure the long-term future of the Parramatta ferry service. The Budget announcement was that \$8 million would be invested over two years only to retain the service, and the negative environmental impact of the current vessels in operation was not addressed.

The Budget's announcement retaining the Rivercat comes not long after expressions of interest to the private sector failed to find a suitable operator for the service, and follows years of mismanagement and changes in focus which has negatively impacted on the Rivercat.

Since its inception in 1992, the Rivercat's status as a commuter service or a tourist service has been clouded and variable. What the service requires for it to succeed is for it to be integrated into both the transport and tourism strategy plans for the city. The Government's Budget announcement opens the door for this to happen by expanding the amount of daily services the Rivercat will offer.

The newly-announced operating schedules are hourly services 7am to 7pm weekdays, an increase of three trips per day, and 8am to 6pm on weekends, an increase of

one trip.

The Rivercat's success as a commuter service lies with the NSW Government. Now that the service has been granted a two years extension, the government must implement the essential supporting infrastructure. Much of the increasing number of commuters working in and around Parramatta are employed by or as a result of NSW Government Departments. Therefore the Chamber believes that the government should encourage and reward its employees to use Parramatta's ferry service.

As the owner of Sydney Ferries and therefore the Parramatta Rivercat operation, the Chamber also believes that the NSW Government should put in place a promotional campaign to highlight its benefits as a commuter service. With the option of driving to work becoming more expensive, frustrating and environmentally damaging, a market exists for other alternatives and market awareness of this needs to be stressed.

As a tourism service, a river trip to Parramatta will always enjoy a level of success as it is a magnificent journey and Sydney has an abundance of tourists and residents that hear about it or stumble by accident. We need to market this better.

For a river service to Parramatta to truly succeed as a tourism element, it must be part of a wider, fully enmeshed tourism plan for Parramatta. Much to the Chamber's disappointment, this does not exist.

A potential exists for Parramatta to host larger numbers of day-trippers. Both international and domestic visitors to Sydney as well as residents of other parts of Sydney value what Parramatta has to offer, yet its gifts are not wrapped in an easy to use fashion and nor are they promoted effectively.

The responsibility for developing a fully-integrated and highly-effective tourism plan for Parramatta lies with Council and with the various businesses involved in this sector, with the assistance of the NSW Government through agencies such as Sydney Ferries and Tourism NSW.

The Parramatta Chamber of Commerce has for some time stood ready to assist with effective measures to ensure that the long-term viability of a Parramatta ferry service is realised. It has long been the view of the Chamber that a comprehensive and centrally-managed by stakeholders approach is the only way to accomplish Parramatta's potential as a tourism destination.

The river is the most appealing entry-point delivering day-trippers to Parramatta, yet the Charles Street Wharf Parramatta's tourism products are not combined as a package of experiences which can be linked to the Rivercat as a means of delivering visitors. lacks the tourism-focused facilities allowing it to be an effective welcome and distribution point for visitors. Additionally,

We have our ferry and we have our timeline of two years to make it work. Sitting back on our hands watching, hoping it will succeed, won't do the job. Smart business principles need to be applied to attract and maintain the Rivercat's identified key markets, with the NSW Government, Parramatta City Council, Parramatta Chamber of Commerce and the business and residential communities of Parramatta all playing their roles.