



Bastion Point beach, where the boat ramp would be.

Artist's impression of the proposed breakwater.

Pressure ramps up to dump Labor's breakwater project

By **ROYCE MILLAR**

PRESSURE is mounting on the Baillieu government to abandon plans for a 130-metre breakwater in East Gippsland with the revelation that the Brumby government bankrolled the project against the advice of its own boating safety experts.

Documents obtained by *The Age* show that former major projects minister Tim Pallas last year ignored an expert panel established by Marine Safety Victoria, which advised against funding the facility at Bastion Point beach near Mallacoota.

The minister approved \$1.5 million for the breakwater, five times the maximum allowed for under the Boating Safety and Facilities Program.

The project proponent, the East Gippsland Shire, asked for \$600,000. Mr Pallas raised another \$5 million and, in the dying days before going into pre-election caretaker mode in October, announced a surprise \$6.5 million grant.

Mr Pallas's decision, revealed in freedom of information documents, has firmed views of

community groups and within the state bureaucracy that Labor's enthusiasm for the breakwater was about securing support from then independent East Gippsland MP, Craig Ingram, in the event of a hung parliament.

In June Mr Ingram sent both major parties a wish-list of 17 items, including the breakwater, saying they were "an important part of my consideration in the event of a hung parliament".

He would not comment when contacted by *The Age*. In the end, Labor lost the election and Mr Ingram lost his seat.

Fishermen, mainly from the abalone industry, currently launch boats from a basic beach ramp with the help of tractors. Mr Ingram's family has long been involved in the abalone industry. The project includes a 130-metre pier and a two-lane access road.

Mr Pallas's rejection of advice on Bastion Point echoed former planning minister Justin Madden's 2008 approval of the project despite recommendations against it by an independent planning panel and his own

bureaucrats. The planning panel found the breakwater was unsafe, uneconomic and of "no societal benefit". It recommended a "minor" upgrade that would not interfere with the surf break and reef.

The Coalition has agreed to consider a low-impact alternative. Last night the community group opposed to the breakwater, Save Bastion Point, urged the government to consider a smaller, lower-impact ramp.

Mr Madden would not discuss the matter with *The Age*. Mr Pallas issued a written statement, that said the outcome "was approved by the Planning Minister and supported by the local council and the local member".

A government spokesperson said: "The government recognises the undisputed need to upgrade ocean access arrangements at Mallacoota. The government is currently working with the local community to finalise these arrangements which includes investigating the feasibility, design and costs associated with an upgrade project at the current boat ramp site."