

Mallacoota Ocean Access Boat Ramp Safety Issues

Background

The provision of safe ocean access at Bastion Point has been one of the key motivations behind the East Gippsland Shire Council proceeding with the development plans for Bastion Point known as Option 3b. Preparation of final documentation to support the development has included a Safety Audit of the proposal. This was to be used to inform the design and associated operational, safety and management arrangements for the new ramp. An audit of safety issues was subsequently commissioned by Marine Safety Victoria (MSV) and conducted by Australian Maritime College Search Ltd. (AMCS). Importantly, the brief given to AMCS determined that the audit be based around the facility as exhibited in the Environment Effects Statement and on how risks associated with the facility could be made as low as reasonably practical. This in no way suggests the facility will be safe but rather that risks have been minimised as much as possible. The audit has identified a broad range of risk mitigation treatments that include administrative measures which could readily be applied to any ocean boating facility and a number based on engineering associated with the ramp, boating channel and ancillary structures. Significantly, the audit concludes by recommending that all treatment options be addressed. This will prove to be an onerous and costly exercise and will require a firm commitment from Regulating and Policing authorities. The following is a brief review of critical safety issues that will be difficult if not impossible to resolve.

Assumptions

The audit is based on assumptions in relation to the operation of the proposed facility. A number of these assumptions are questionable and play a critical role in the provision of safe ocean access. The most significant four are outlined as follows.

Assumption 1 - “..wave conditions at the entrance to the channel and those in the channel...are sufficiently benign”.

Wave conditions at the entrance to the channel will only be “benign” during relatively low swell conditions for a limited number of days per year. Consequently the risk treatment plan tables (12.1, Ref.1a) are inaccurate. The raw risk rating would more accurately reflect the true boating conditions at the channel entrance. This view is confirmed by the reference to major extensions to the breakwater as detailed under treatment options, pages 46, 47 and 48 of the audit.

Assumption 2 - “...sand build up...will not be greater than assumed by the designer and will be able to be handled by the proposed dredge”

The quantities of sand estimated at (15-20,000cu m per annum) have been disputed by reputable coastal engineers¹ familiar with the East Gippsland coastline who consider that the quantity is underestimated. Should quantities be higher, they will cause significant operational and safety issues. Furthermore, at the time of writing, details of the dredge such as type, size, pumping capacity etc. have not been confirmed. Safety issues regarding discharge point of sand spoil have also been excluded from the audit.

Assumption 3 - “...sand build up, will not generate good surfing conditions at the entrance to the channel”

The accumulation of sand in the area described is highly variable and it is not uncommon for quality surfing waves to form in this locality. The exit of the boating channel terminates in an area where surfers are finishing a ride from the “broken boards” break or congregating in an area known as “the bommies” which is where they catch the wave known as “the point”.

¹ As per submissions and expert evidence presented to Panel Inquiry.

Assumption 4 - "the boat ramp will not be used at any one time by more than the number of boats that there are spaces for in the car park".

AMCS was provided with carpark plans for 30 trailer spaces. Its assumption is therefore at odds with the proponent's goal that usage of the ramp doubles. Historical evidence shows in excess of 40 boats using the existing facility in suitable conditions during peak periods. Further to this, the final car park plan provides spaces for 35 boats and trailers. It makes very little provision for ordinary car spaces or consideration of traffic congestion and overflow issues during peak periods as required under treatment option E.4, page 181.

Conclusion

These assumptions based on factors critical to safety give little confidence that the proposed facility will be able to deliver relatively safe ocean access. When all the other treatment options are carefully considered, it soon becomes apparent that:

1. The proposed facility will be unable to deliver safety outcomes that have been instrumental in supporting decisions to proceed with the development.
2. Critical safety risks have been under-rated and do not accurately reflect site conditions.
3. The expectation within the boating community that the new facility will significantly improve boating safety and ocean access will result in far greater numbers attempting to use the facility than can be safely accommodated.
4. The facility has a large number of costly administrative treatment options which all demand a high level of ongoing financial commitment from a range of Government agencies, including policing.
5. The development promoted as safe ocean access will in reality be declared a *hazardous boating zone*.
6. The frequency of the monitoring regime has not been detailed and may prove to be a costly and onerous task.
7. Appropriate rescue vessel and crew has not been identified or funded.
8. Risk ratings from table 12.1 will rapidly escalate to higher levels if all treatment options are not applied or implemented.

The significant and continually escalating costs of the proposal, little or no improvement in critical risks areas with no potential for growth, and the failure to deliver any real benefits to the community indicate that this proposal should not proceed any further.

A low cost/low impact upgrade should be constructed at the existing site as per the recommendation of the Inquiry Panel.