

Wednesday, 02 July 2008 | 02:11 PM

Mid-West city eyes top billing

2nd July 2008, 10:00 WST

Geraldton has set its viewfinder on being WA's premier regional city on the back of a clutch of initiatives that include a \$30 million project to redevelop the foreshore and revitalise the CBD.

Earmarked as a property hot spot, it also has the Batavia Coast marina development, burgeoning tourism attractions, including a new resort in the town and a proposed eco-resort on the Abrolhos Islands, major new residential estates, an expanding pearling industry, a mooted hotel and the proposed \$3 billion multi-user deep water port and associated rail and other infrastructure at Oakajee, 20km north of the city.



As an indication of the growth, a \$4 million project to build a brand-new marine services precinct with a 200-tonne heavy boat lifter is tipped to generate 600 direct and indirect jobs after 10 years of operation and inject \$15 million into the community every year. This is nearing completion and already there is significant interest from potential clients.

Nestled in the heart of the Coral Coast, Geraldton will become a more prominent bump on the world map if Australia wins its bid for the \$2 billion Square Kilometre Array project, an international radio telescope with a total collecting area of one square kilometre. Australia is competing with South Africa to host the facility, which will be the world's premier instrument for radio-astronomical imaging.

A total of about \$100 million has been allocated to the Australian Square Kilometre Array Pathfinder (ASKAP), or demonstration project, which will be a test bed for the SKA technology.

A new Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory (MRO) is being established at the proposed SKA site in the Mid-West's Murchison region to host preliminary projects, and both the MRO and SKA, if they go ahead, will present major opportunities for businesses down to fencing contracts.

Steve Douglas, chief executive officer of the Mid-West Development Commission, said a major aim was to further develop Geraldton as a hub for smart industry and smart infrastructure and build on the establishment in recent years of the Geraldton Universities Centre and the Separation Point Marine Precinct.

"It isn't just about the resources boom, there are a whole host of other things happening," he said. "Geraldton is a learning, smart, sustainable city ... and we should become one of the premier cities in regional WA.

"People and investors both within and beyond the Mid-West are rapidly becoming aware of the opportunities Geraldton and the broader Mid-West have to offer."

The foreshore project embraces the land between the city's two bookends, the port at one end and the Batavia Coast marina at the other. Behind it sits the main city centre, which is also in line to benefit.

Later this year, LandCorp will market and sell on behalf of the Public Transport Authority an 8300sqm parcel of land on Marine Terrace, which is the main street and runs into the city mall. The zoning of the land will allow for a range of possible uses, including retail-commercial, tourism and residential.

With a north-facing aspect, the land is considered one of the most important strategic sites in regional WA. Linking the city centre with the foreshore and marina, it is likely to be released to market via a design tender process.

LandCorp was also the project manager on behalf of the Mid-West Development Commission for stage one of the Batavia Coast marina, a \$7

million project that has created opportunities for commercial, residential, tourist, retail, hospitality and mixed-use developments, and is considered a major drawcard for Geraldton.

The first stage of land subdivision has been completed and all the lots have been sold. Commercial and residential buildings have been built with several more planned, including a hotel, serviced apartments, tavern and offices.

Public facilities include boat pens, boat launching ramps and a timber boardwalk along the water's edge with pedestrian access to proposed alfresco dining and other activities. A pre-feasibility study for stage two of the redevelopment, which is likely to be a mixed-use precinct, is under way.

By removing the railway line that was near the water and relocating Foreshore Drive out to where the railway line used to lie, the council has created space for the shops in the city centre to be revamped and encouraged to turn to face the foreshore.

“Through public investment in infrastructure, it is expected that private sector investment will come in behind and develop a lot of those buildings so they can take advantage of the north-facing aspect, protection from the breeze and ocean views,” Mr Douglas said. “It’s a fantastic commercial opportunity.”

On the foreshore itself, there are leisure facilities and a water playground and plans for a Dome cafe. And at the port end of the foreshore, the council is hoping to put in a multi-user facility to house the visitor centre and other offices.

“A lot of public investment is going into the foreshore and it has already triggered, and will continue to trigger, further private sector investment on the foreshore and adjoining CBD area,” Mr Douglas said. “It will be a first-class recreational waterfront.

City of Geraldton-Greenough mayor Ian Carpenter said the foreshore development was changing the face of Geraldton. “It will make the property owners in the CBD look very seriously at turning around and facing the water, which they have never been able to do before because there was a railway line there,” he said.

Mid-West City by 11/11/11
“There was no beach at all. That whole foreshore has been created from the sand that was taken out of the southern transport corridor area.”

Mid-West Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive officer Karen Godfrey said the chamber had grown by 100 new members each year for the past five years and now had about 550 members, making it the second biggest in regional WA.

“There are other regions looking at Geraldton and saying what are you doing that is right,” she said.

“We don’t spend 1 1 /2 hours going to work, or 1 1 /2 hours coming home, so we don’t have to fight fuel prices because of the distance. We’ve got extraordinary wages and fantastic opportunity with the growth.

“At the moment it is affordable but I don’t think Geraldton will be affordable in three years’ time.”

The region had the nation’s biggest deposit of iron ore after the Pilbara and offered a good lifestyle. “If you want to fly in fly out, go to the Pilbara, we don’t want you here, we want you to come and live here and invest here,” she said.

PERTH
CATHY SAUNDERS

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