

Red tape ties up ship for peninsula dive site

BY ANDREW MATHIESON

DELAYS from bureaucratic red tape are jeopardising the likelihood that a warship will provide a major tourism boon for local diving operators.

The Bellarine Peninsula is set to inherit HMAS Canberra as an artificial reef but the ship is lying stranded in West Australia.

Plans have been afloat since last year to sink the vessel off Point Lonsdale.

Federal and State governments have agreed to the transfer the vessel to the peninsula.

The Department of Defence has committed \$2.8 million to the venture as a part of the sharing agreement.

State Government is expected to pick up the remaining costs, believed to be around \$500,000, to transport the ship sitting in a dock in Perth.

However, state authorities have held off on signing the deal.

A spokesperson for Defence Minister Brendan Neilson said yesterday the Federal Government had completed its side of the deal.

Canberra was now waiting on the state's agreement to the signing and

change over of the deeds.

"It's ready to go as soon as Steve Bracks, his tourism minister or the local MP have nussed out the arrangements of getting it there," the spokesperson said.

"We're not washing our hands off it. We want to see it there – we want to get it there as quick as possible."

Member for Bellarine Lisa Neville and her Melbourne ministerial office have failed to return the Independent calls for the past three weeks.

The ministerial office for tourism also failed yesterday to clarify when

the state would act on the ship.

The last step toward bringing HMAS Canberra to the Bellarine Peninsula would be to negotiate a contract with maritime defence service companies to transport the ship.

Ms Neville has previously told the *Independent* the ship would increase diver visits to Victoria by 10 per cent.

A spokesperson for federal Liberal Stewart McArthur said the Member for Corangamite would encourage a quick resolution.

"We're looking forward to it being delivered," he said.

Keep up to date with the "Let's Sink the HMAS Canberra" project at www.hmascanberra.com.au

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