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## Businessman's dream of Clyde hovercraft service goes on trial

HOPES of returning hovercraft to the Clyde after a gap of 35 years were raised yesterday with the start of a three-day trial.

Alistair Macleod, a businessman, saw his long-held dream of running fast maritime transport into Glasgow city centre take a step forward when the 12-seat craft began private tests.

The chief executive of Clydefast hopes to launch an hourly, 130-seat hovercraft link between Dunoon and Glasgow within two years. He said the service was expected to take 52 minutes – 20 minutes faster than by ferry and train. It would also be extended to Rothesay on Bute, adding an extra 15 minutes.

He said a 38-minute trip from Greenock to Glasgow may even be possible, compared with 30-42 minutes by train. A trial run

ALASTAIR DALTON

yesterday between Port Glasgow and the Clyde Arc – the so-called squinty bridge – near the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre in Glasgow, took 30 minutes.

The hovercraft could not travel further towards its planned final destination at the Broomielaw in the city centre because of bridge repairs. It is expected to operate at about 45mph in the lower Clyde and about 30mph in Glasgow.

However, sceptics doubted there would be sufficient demand and said trains offered faster, cheaper and more frequent journeys.

Mr Macleod masterminded last year's Kirkcaldy-Edinburgh hovercraft trial for Stagecoach.



Plan is for a 130-seater service between Dunoon and Glasgow

He is using the smaller craft the transport firm hired for further tests in the Forth last month for the non-passenger Clyde trials.

Like Brian Souter, Stagecoach's chief executive, Mr Macleod has turned to hovercraft after experiencing delays with original

plans to operate fast ferries in the Forth and Clyde respectively.

However, both still face funding challenges, with public subsidy likely to be required for them to take to the water.

While Mr Souter halted preparatory work on a cross-Forth link last month in a row over funding uncertainties, Mr Macleod has also still to secure financial backing for his venture.

He said talks were continuing with the public-private co-ordinating body Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT). He said of the trial: "It will, hopefully, demonstrate the potential for a permanent hovercraft operation to be brought to the Clyde."

However, Neil Kay, a economic professor at Strathclyde University, doubted a hovercraft could fit under the Clyde Arc

bridge. Prof Kay is also convinced such a service is not commercially feasible, as it would have to compete with parallel roads and railways. He said trains offered commuters a far more attractive and flexible service.

Ron Culley, the chief executive of SPT, said: "Development of the Clyde as an additional transport channel helps the ongoing regeneration of the area."

Hovercraft last operated on the Clyde in 1972, when the Caledonian Steam Packet Co, a forerunner of CalMac, scrapped a service between Largs and Cumbrae after two years due to mechanical problems and passenger discomfort.

A previous service between the main Clyde resorts was operated in 1965-66 by Clyde Hover Ferries, but it lost money heavily, and blamed bad weather.