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After a 40-year break hovercraft could soon be returning to the Clyde

A HOVERCRAFT service could return to the Clyde after 40 years if trials today prove successful.

The 12-passenger craft will make twice-daily round trips from Glasgow to Dunoon as harbourmasters assess the impact on other river users.

Clydefast, the company behind the project, says the service will knock 20 minutes off the current journey time of an hour-and-a-quarter by train and ferry.

It is hoped the three-day trial will lead to a permanent service carrying up to 130 passengers.

Hovercraft were last seen in regular use on the Clyde in the late 1960s.

Alistair Macleod, chief executive of Clydefast, said of the trial: "It will hopefully demonstrate the potential for a permanent hovercraft operation to be brought to the Clyde."

"The service will be fast: for example, a service from

Dunoon to Glasgow will reach the city centre in 52 minutes, more than 20 minutes quicker than the present journey time of an hour-and-a-quarter by train and ferry.

"Rothesay will be included in a permanent operation which would add a further 15 minutes to the journey.

"Another bonus in using the hovercraft would be its ability to navigate bridges which don't open.

"Some of the current Clyde

bridges restrict catamaran ferries getting directly to the city centre, particularly at the Broomielaw."

Ron Culley, chief executive of Strathclyde Passenger Transport, said: "We're delighted to support this trial.

"Development of the Clyde as an additional transport channel helps the ongoing regeneration of the area.

"By encouraging varied and fun ways to travel along the river, we can continue to make

Glasgow a vibrant location for people to visit."

During the trials the hovercraft will run between Glasgow's SECC, Braehead, East India Harbour in Greenock and Dunoon.

A permanent service would operate to and from Glasgow Broomielaw, Braehead, Greenock, Dunoon and Rothesay.

Last month plans for a hovercraft service across the Firth of Forth were put on hold until

the Scottish Government provided "clarification" on whether it will receive public funding to get the service underway.

Operators Stagecoach, whose co-founder Brian Souter gave £500,000 to the SNP last year, complained that, instead of getting a kick-start from the public sector, the project has become a political football.

Lord Foulkes, Labour Lothians MSP, who had raised con-

cerns over the possibility of Mr Souter's party donations influencing the government's decision, suggested that the firm had discovered it would not receive any favouritism and was trying to use him as a scapegoat to "justify" pulling out of the project.

The service has won support from both the current Scottish Government and the previous Labour-led executive, which approved public funding of more than £90,000 from

the South East of Scotland Transport Partnership for a two-week pilot last July.

Stagecoach said the £300,000 pilot, between Kirkcaldy and Portobello, established the viability of a permanent preferred route between Kirkcaldy and Leith, near Portobello.

The service would involve a £10m investment by the Stagecoach group plus, crucially, £3.3m in public sector funding for the first three years.