

The Maid of the Loch and community disempowerment

Description



■ The Maid of the Loch is a static attraction at Balloch.

Government grant saves Maid of the Loch

RUSSELL LEADBETTER

JUST over two months ago, the charity aiming to refloat the historic Loch Lomond paddle-steamer, Maid of the Loch, was "devastated" to learn that its bid for £3.7 million of Heritage Lottery funding had been rejected.

"It is going to take some time to absorb this news and the reasons behind it", said John Beveridge, chairman of Loch Lomond Steamship Company, which has been restoring the vessel since 1996.

The charity, however, promised that the decision "is not the end of the road" and said it still firmly believed in the project.

Now it learned that a £950,000 capi-

tal grant funding award by the Scottish Government had been confirmed, meaning that the goal of returning the ship to sailing lives on.

The package from the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund (RCGF), awarded earlier this year, hung in the balance following the "disappointing" news from Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The charity said the Scottish Government announcement meant that the Maid could look forward to 2019 "with a renewed focus, with work already confirmed including repairs to the ship's hull, creation of an on-board education facility, refurbishing the main function suite, and overhauling the engines to enable them to turn with steam."

Mr Beveridge said: "This is a huge

boost to the project and will reform the Maid's attraction to the public. After the shock of HLF rejecting its bid, this gives the charity real momentum to continue with our efforts.

"Our next step will see the ship brought out of the water in January to allow us to carry out an essential sound test of the entire hull to assess its condition. Any repairs required will be carried out, including replacing the ship's port side belting, the fender that protects the hull from the pier.

"Slipping the ship will be a real sight to see' spectacle and a major undertaking for us all. It will be the first time any work has been done on the ship since 1981, so there is great excitement among our volunteers w

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The case for the restoration of the Maid of the Loch

The case for the restoration of the Maid of the Loch is extremely strong. The boat itself is part of our industrial and cultural heritage <https://www.maidoftheloch.org/history>. As importantly, its mooring by the pier is located next door to the steam slipway and winch house which are listed and still functioning. There could be no more appropriate setting for the Maid and the parts together could form an integral whole. Unfortunately the area around is blighted by neglect and poorly designed car parks.

The Maid of the Loch was decommissioned in 1981 and left to decay until bought by West Dumbarton District Council in 1992. It was then taken over by volunteers in 1996. They have been working ever since to raise the money to restore the Maid to working condition. Earlier this year they were hopeful at long last of success with a £3.7m bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. That bid was refused and sets the context for the announcement last week (see above) that the Scottish Government has now provided a £950k grant. Its not nearly enough. This post takes a look at the issues.

With a bit of vision, however, the whole of the pierhead area could be restored. There is a great opportunity for a sympathetically designed museum/heritage area to interpret the history of this site and how this relates to the human and natural history of Loch Lomond. There are many fascinating stories to be told from the bleach fields, which were dependent of the plentiful clean waters of Loch Leven, to how material from the Drumkinnon gravel pits was taken up Loch Lomond to construct the Loch Sloy dam.

The wider case for restoration of the Maid has several elements. It would provide an authentic tourist experience on one of the most famous bodies of water in the world. Other commercial operators of boat trips on Loch Lomond should not fear the competition as it would help increase the number of visitors to Loch Lomond. That would generate jobs, both directly and indirectly. It would add to the "waterbus" network across Loch Lomond and, with will, could provide an extension to our public transport system.

Resources and community empowerment

The case for the Maid's restoration is extremely strong and what's more the success of the Sir Walter Scott Steamship Trust on Loch Katrine shows what can be done given adequate funding. It should be a "no-brainer". Yet volunteers have now laboured for 22 years and effectively got nowhere. They may, by their efforts, have saved the Maid from rotting away and recovered many of the missing parts but the Scottish Government's grant of £950k is still only a quarter of what is needed to return her to working order. There are parallels with other community projects, such as the Govanhill Baths in the southside of Glasgow. In both cases, rewards have not been commensurate to effort. That is not a criticism of the people involved but the system in which they operate.

Politicians love to talk about community empowerment but unless they give communities access to the resources necessary to realise visions this is just spin. In Scotland we live under one of the most centralised systems of government in the world. Local Authorities have been emaciated and Community Councils have no resources at all. Instead, crumbs are returned by a central government which is keen to show its listening. The grant to the Maid in the Loch is a case in point. The question is why would the Scottish Government give the Maid just a quarter of the money they require?

The Government's most probable answer would be along the lines that money is short, that £950k is all they had available and its up to the Maid to raise money from other sources. The private sector has had 22 years to step in but now, just by coincidence, the Scottish Government's plans to flog off the rest of the West Riverside site to Flamingo Land are in deep trouble. What if Flamingo Land stepped in and offered to make up the difference? Would they then carry a slightly revised planning application on a wave of public gratitude?

Its hard to be sure. Flamingo Land have appeared so far very reluctant to invest anything in the West Riverside Site which would benefit the public. Community aspirations for a pedestrian bridge over the River Leven have been brushed aside. Unlike a bridge though, the Maid would offer the opportunity to make money. While £2.75m might seem a lot of money, this is nothing compared to the real value of the land at Balloch which lies within Flamingo Land's grasp.

In situations like this, organisations like the Maid of the Loch are faced with a dilemma. Do they try to

play the system to realise their dreams or do they speak out and risk been shunned by the powers that be? The Maid of the Loch supported the Flamingo Land Planning application and, though I fundamentally disagreed with this, I can understand why. It seemed like the only show in town and the latest Scottish Government will probably have served to re-inforce this.

Government needs to fund projects like Maid of the Loch

There is no lack of money in the world. Billions are devoted to asset speculation and bubbles rather than investment that would create jobs while private banks create money at will, most of which feeds the speculation. It should be the job of politicians at every level to redesign our current financial system so that there is money to invest in projects like the Maid of the Loch and to empower local communities.

Even under our current system, however, the restoration could have been financed by government given the will. For example:

- What if Scottish Enterprise had made the restoration of the Maid its primary mission at Balloch instead of trying to sell West Riverside on the cheap?
<https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2018/11/02/scottish-enterprises-unspent-9-5m-and-a-community-alternative-to-flamingo-land/>
- Back in 2004 the LLTNPA decided to buy a solar boat and were considering splashing out £400k on this http://www.solarnavigator.net/scottish_solar_boat.htm. It was one of those ideas that sound good but was ill thought out. No consideration was given to the amount of sun Loch Lomond receives compared to the Alps or whether the boat was fit for purpose. In the end £160K was spent https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12401972.Solar_boat_will_make_loch_trips_light_work_Catal and a considerable amount after that on maintenance (£60k?) all to no effect. In the summer the LLTNPA put the boat up for sale for just £8k

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The point is not that the money wasted on the solar boat would have been sufficient to fund the restoration Maid of the Loch, although I am sure it would have been welcomed by the Trust, but rather that the problem is our Public Authorities just don't see it as their responsibility to help make well thought out community initiatives happen. They would rather waste resources on their own fancies.

Indeed the suspicion is that it rather suits government in all its forms that well-intentioned people get tied up in negotiating the endless barriers to the resources needed to realise their dreams. Meantime, no effort is spared in providing government support to the 1%. Flamingo Land is not just being offered the West Riverside site on the cheap, Scottish Enterprise have provided further financial support in the form of ground investigations while the LLTNPA are devoting significant resources to getting their planning application through.

To realise the dreams of local communities and the wider public we need to change this rotten system.

[Note: apologies to readers, wordpress has been upgraded and this has created glitches with links and downloads]

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. cultural heritage
2. LLTNPA
3. Local Authorities
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