

■ Councillors defer first applicant so both developments can be assessed during site visit

Room for two loch shore visitor centres, says tourism official

By
Andy Dixon

AN organisation which promotes tourism around Loch Ness insists there is enough room for two rival multi-million pound visitor developments to go ahead.

Graeme Ambrrose, the executive director of Destination Loch Ness, feels visitors would benefit from the proposed schemes by Jacobite Cruises and the Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition — which are set for sites only 800 metres apart.

"We would welcome any economic development like this because the tourism infrastructure for years has been really pretty weak," he said. "If both happen, I'm sure there is room."

Jacobite Cruises wants to build a £2.3 million harbour at Brackla, off the A82, with a visitor centre, cafe and car park. It hoped to receive planning approval on Tuesday but instead the decision was deferred to allow Highland councillors to visit the site, a move which calls into question the company's ability to complete the project in time for the 2012 tourist season.

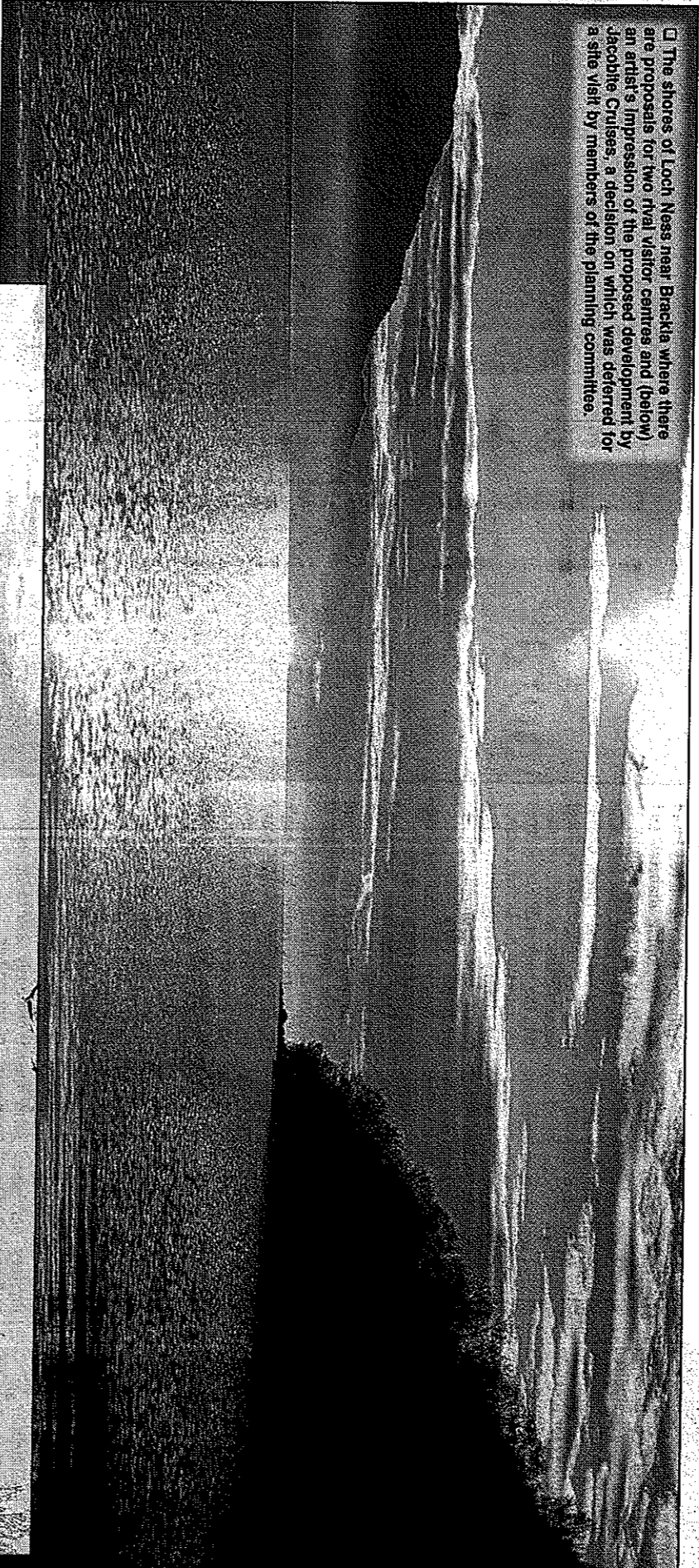
Meanwhile, the Bremner family, who own the Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition in Drum-na-droich, want to construct their own £2 million facility at the existing harbour by the Clansman Hotel, incorporating jetty for small boats and cafes, a cafe and shop.

It is now likely both schemes will be considered in March. Mr Ambrrose believes each has the potential to improve Loch Ness's appeal to visitors.

"It's all about improving standards, improving the quality of experience and undoubtedly development will certainly do that," he said. "Loch Ness needs developments like that because it has two sides of tourism to it, with the south side as the wild side with self-catering, while the north side is very much focused on the monster element, and this will help meet the demand."

However, Doree-based Nessie spotter Steve Feilham is worried about possible over-development. "I don't think we necessarily

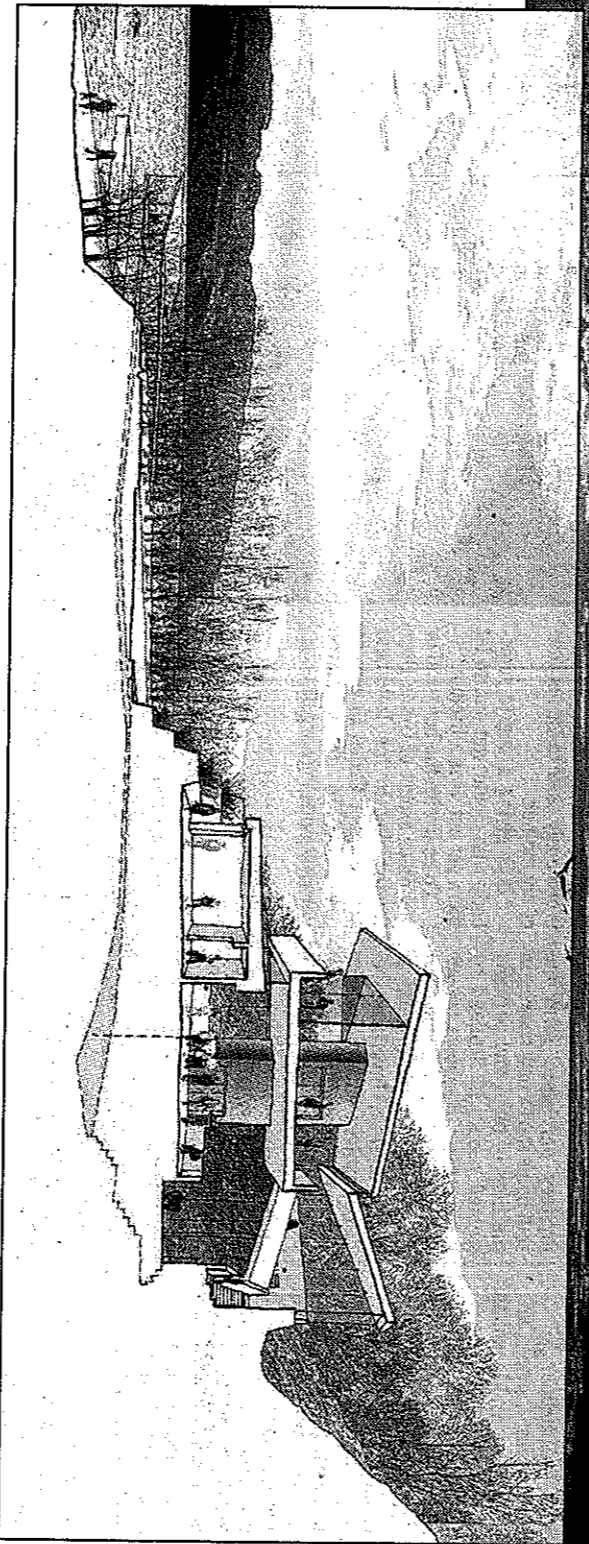
□ The shores of Loch Ness near Brackla where there are proposals for two rival visitor centres and (below) an artist's impression of the proposed development by Jacobite Cruises, a decision on which was deferred for a site visit by members of the planning committee.



"Tourists expect a high calibre of attractions and it is really time for Loch Ness to make sure that all the new developments are of that standard."

Highland Council's area planning manager David Polson stressed councillors would be advised to consider each project individually and not decide between the two.

First, however, he has to arrange the site visit. "The A82 is not the best of roads and we will have to do a risk assessment to make sure that nobody is put in any danger when we go and have a look," he said. "What we can't have is people wandering along the A82."



Decision delayed

REPRESENTATIVES of the two projects sat on opposite sides of the public gallery when Jacobite Cruises' application was considered by councillors on Tuesday.

Ard an Loch Ness representative Margaret Davidson spoke first, immediately suggesting a site visit and describing it as a very important local matter. She was followed by a request from Central councillor

Donnie Kerr that a forestry officer is present during any site visit due to the number of trees that would be affected.

Councillor Hamish Wood seconded the views of ward colleague Councillor Davidson before Inverness South councillor John Holden argued the application should be dealt with there and then so it did not clash with consideration of the Bremners' project in March.

Committee chairman Jimmy Gray agreed they would benefit from a site visit but reminded members they could only deal with applications in front of them following former city provost Bob Wynd's complaint that they were receiving information on developments in the area piecemeal.

Afterwards Jacobite Cruises director Rod Michie regretted the delay but said the company was

still committed to the scheme, named The Jacobite Discovery Project.

"It will greatly enhance the area's tourism offer whilst being a major boost to the local economy," he said. "We remain keen to start work on the project as early as possible."

In contrast, Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition director Robbie Bremner described the deferral as "the fair and sensible thing to do".

"It means that not only will both applications be seen at the same committee meeting but councillors will have the opportunity to visit both project sites, and get a visual understanding of how the developments could look," he said. "Our family have been a steadfast feature of Loch Ness tourism since 1964 and have enjoyed a positive working relationship with Jacobite Cruises for more than 20 years."