

Luxury boat firm plans 'world-class' facility

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PRINCESS Yachts is to submit plans for a massive £45 million factory that will create hundreds of jobs in Plymouth.

The luxury boatbuilder said its plans for a five-storey high, 300,000sq ft production hanger in Devonport's South Yard would create 200 jobs initially, with possibly more to follow, and secure the futures of 1,885 staff already employed in the city.

It wants to build the enormous structure in three phases, starting with a £15 million segment under way this year, so it can build gigantic £10 million boats for the lucrative superyacht market.

The overall plan for a 'world class manufacturing facility' will be submitted to Plymouth City Council next week.

It also includes an office block, 350-ton cranes and a covered waterside area at 'shallow dock' to allow boats to be worked on while afloat.

On top of the cost of the factory, Princess Yachts wants to pay millions of pounds more to buy the 15-acre South Yard area it moved into last summer.

Consultations have already begun on the plan, which would bring shipbuilding back to the historic Devonport naval dockyard.

The firm intends to keep its other bases in Plymouth, including in Stonehouse, where smaller vessels are made.

But it will finally lay to rest a previous plan for a sales and finishing facility at Millbay.

Managing director Chris Gates, who yesterday outlined the South Yard plans to the board of the Devonport Regeneration Community Partnership, stressed the firm was committed to Plymouth.

He said: "It is a sign of real strength that, in the turmoil of this economic downturn we are still able to look forward positively.

"While the market has not recovered yet, these exciting developments will place us in pole position for when we see the market return to full strength again."

Mr Gates said the plan would be 'great for the local community, great for the UK, great for Plymouth' and added: "We would commit to having 200 jobs if this facility is built."

And he said: "We have to get the facility here fast. It enables the rest of the business to grow."

He said obtaining planning consent was the first of three 'hurdles' to overcome.

The second is the purchase of the freehold of the site, which is needed for the firm to secure investment.

Mr Gates stressed the firm had already been well supported by Defence Estates and the Ministry of Defence.

Another is an application for between £1.5 million and £2.5 million of Government grant funding, which is about to be applied for.

Princess Yachts is already world famous for its luxury yachts.

But last year it announced it wanted to move into the superyacht market and it has already started working on a 32m vessel in the South Yard.

The South Yard facility will be used to build other M Class vessels up to 40m long, which would sell for £10 million.

A development team is already working on a boat of this length and 'physical' work should begin in 'a couple of months'.

If the South Yard hanger plans are approved, the superyachts will be built there from scratch.

Mr Gates said: "We have created a world-class reputation for boats up to 95ft. We need to continue that up to 40m and create a customer demand for bigger. We want to do it as fast as we can, as quickly as the market would allow us."

(This article first appeared in the Plymouth Herald)