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Puget communities should move ahead on ferry service

By Dow Constantine
Special to The Times

The King County Ferry District has saved the Vashon Island-to-downtown passenger-ferry run and is looking to expand its Puget Sound operations — but it cannot do the job alone. The only way to get more passenger ferries on Puget Sound is for local communities, their leaders and state government to work together on establishing new service.

Any hope that Washington State Ferries would be able to provide, much less expand, passenger-ferry service has been dashed by the agency's proposed long-range plan. Under the best scenario, WSF is hoping to get just enough money to maintain current service levels. Facing an \$8 billion deficit, legislators and the governor are not likely to be in the mood to expand ferry funding.

Secretary of Transportation Paula Hammond deserves credit for making ferry service a priority in her department and for appointing smart new leadership to run the system. But the department cannot be expected to expand ferry service or add passenger service without the money to pay for it.

King County is ready to be part of the solution. Two years ago, the King County Council created a ferry district to save the Vashon Island-to-downtown Seattle route after the state stopped funding it. The King County Ferry District, an independent government agency, also took over the Elliott Bay Water Taxi, a passenger ferry that runs between downtown and West Seattle. Last year, a record-breaking 182,940 riders used the service — a 13-percent increase over 2007 and a 70-percent rise over 2005.

Looking ahead, the Ferry District is exploring five potential new routes to move people between Renton, Kenmore, Kirkland, Ballard, Des Moines and Seattle.

We can do much more. Bainbridge Island, Bremerton, Manchester, Port Townsend, Kingston, Tacoma and other waterside communities could collaborate with one another and King County to establish a well-connected and efficient marine transit system.

The state should partner with the counties in this new venture and offer direct funding and other incentives for taking on passenger-ferry services.

A regional network of water taxis would serve our communities in multiple ways. It could provide alternative transportation when inclement weather shuts down major thoroughfares, such as during the record snowfall that pummeled our region last December and the heavy rainstorms that flooded highways only weeks later.

Passenger ferries would provide an alternate mode of transportation for our growing population, especially in light of ongoing road and rail construction projects. While projects such as the Alaskan Way Viaduct replacement can take



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Communities can work together to increase routes on passenger ferries and water taxis such as this.

years or even decades to complete, marine transit services require only boats, docks and shuttle services to connect riders to landside transit.

Other regions are way ahead of us. The San Francisco Bay Area, for example, has a network of passenger ferries that operates on 14 routes, with plans for more. Created in 2004, the Bay Area Water Emergency Transit Authority provides daily transit for the region's commuters. (The name contains the word "emergency" because the system is also responsible for providing backup transportation when bridges and roads are damaged by an earthquake or terrorist attack.)

A similar system in Puget Sound should be financed in the same way as land-transportation infrastructure. While the state funds and maintains major highways, counties raise their own local transit revenues. Likewise, WSF should remain in charge of car-ferry services but local jurisdictions should step up with local money to fund passenger service.

Given our economic times, the writing on the state budget is already on the wall. Instead of waiting for the next storm to paralyze our roadways, Puget Sound's waterside communities can act now to urge for support from the state Legislature — and ensure their citizens a safe and reliable transportation alternative.

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