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Foot ferries nearing a rebirth

County Council approves plan to get commuters off roads, onto Puget Sound

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By **GREGORY ROBERTS**
P-I REPORTER

A new-style Mosquito Fleet could ferry passengers across Puget Sound, and maybe even Lake Washington, under a plan approved unanimously Monday by the King County Council.

"It's an exciting opportunity," Councilman Dow Constantine said. Council members see passenger ferries offering an alternative to highways for commuters, especially when major construction projects such as replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct worsen congestion.

Constantine, a West Seattle Democrat whose district includes Vashon Island, sponsored the measure to set up a countywide ferry district with the authority to impose a property tax to finance passenger-only service. The council, which would serve as the governing board of the district, could enact the tax without a public vote.

No tax plan or route proposals were considered by the council Monday, but the intent is for the county to take over the state-run foot ferry between Vashon Island and downtown Seattle.

The ferry district also likely would manage the Elliott Bay Water Taxi, which operates between downtown and West Seattle. Metro, a division of county government, now runs the taxi in the warmest five months of the year (2007 service started Sunday); the service could be expanded to year-round by the district. The district could pay for the shuttle-van connections to the taxi docks, too.

The measure also singles out the testing of a service on Lake Washington between Kirkland and the University of Washington.

Financing the Vashon ferry, the water taxi and the Lake Washington test would require a property tax of between 2 cents and 3 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation, Constantine said, costing the owner of a home assessed at \$400,000 between \$8 and \$12 a year.

Beyond that, the measure mentions possible expansion of foot ferry service west to Kitsap County and south to Des Moines, Tacoma and Gig Harbor.

None of the ferries is expected to pay its own way through fares. The water taxi, which carried nearly 125,000 passengers in 2006, is operated by a private company under contract to the county, which covered almost half its bill for the service from the \$3 one-way fares. The Vashon foot ferry covered less than 20 percent of its expenses from the \$8.50 fare (charged westbound only), although those costs included supporting capital outlays for boats and docks that are not part of the county's direct payments for the water taxi.



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Karen Ducey / P-I

Alana Paul, left, and family members Sue and Chris Paul, all visiting from Australia, take the Elliott Bay Water Taxi to West Seattle on Monday.

In 1993, the state announced plans to expand passenger-only ferry service on Puget Sound, but voter approval of Initiative 695 in 1999 throttled financing for the service, and the state is getting out of the passenger ferry business. The state has agreed to finance and run the Vashon ferry through June 2008; the ferry district would pay the bills for the next year and handle the operation fully after that.

State and federal money has been allocated for new passenger ferry docks on Vashon Island and in West Seattle. The state also has agreed to sell two mothballed passenger ferries and give the proceeds, estimated at \$8.5 million, to the new ferry district if it takes over the Vashon run. The district likely will buy smaller, more efficient 149-passenger boats for that service, Constantine said.

The ferry district could bring about "the rebirth of the Mosquito Fleet on Puget Sound," Constantine said.

That term refers to the thousands of steam-powered vessels that carried people and goods across the Sound from the 1850s to the 1930s, before railroads and highways rendered most of them obsolete and diesel auto ferries replaced the rest.

As the west side of the Sound develops, peak demand for passenger ferries is expected to triple by 2030.

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