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Passenger ferries: a mobility solution

By Dow Constantine and Jane Hague
Special to The Times

Nearly a century ago, communities around Lake Washington and Puget Sound were linked by a "Mosquito Fleet" of small passenger boats that crisscrossed our waterways.

With highway congestion on the rise and gasoline soaring above \$3 per gallon, the convenient, dependable service these vessels provided can again become part of the mobility solution for our region. That is why the King County Council voted to create the King County Ferry District.

When the state of Washington decided to drop passenger-only service in 2005, the Legislature enacted a law allowing counties to set up ferry districts. King County stepped up to ensure that waterborne service would be increased, rather than eliminated.

Our goals in launching the King County Ferry District are to:

- Save and improve Vashon-to-downtown Seattle passenger-ferry service, which the state was scheduled to abandon in mid-2008;
- Operate and improve the successful Elliott Bay Water Taxi, currently funded by Metro Transit, freeing up additional money for bus service;
- Establish demonstration routes between population and employment centers on Lake Washington and Puget Sound, bringing new transit options to people throughout the county; and,
- Create new shuttle-bus service to serve these ferry commuters and the surrounding communities.

The state authorized a property tax as the sole funding source for ferry districts. The proposal adopted on Nov. 13 by the ferry district board (composed of the nine County Council members) establishes a property tax of 5.5 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation — or about \$1.83 per month for the owner of a \$400,000 home.

This tax would raise \$18.3 million in 2008, the largest portion of which (\$13.3 million) would go into a reserve for future capital costs. Another \$1.1 million would go to 2008 operating costs for the Vashon passenger ferry and Elliott Bay Water Taxi and \$418,000 for West Seattle and Vashon shuttle-bus service. The remainder of the funds would be for immediate capital needs (\$1.8 million), mainly for terminal and dock improvements, with the rest funding management, overhead and one-time startup costs.

New demonstration routes will then be phased in, one each year. They will link Seattle with shoreline communities on



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The Elliott Bay Water Taxi shuttles passengers to West Seattle.

Lake Washington such as Kirkland, Kenmore and Renton, and Puget Sound communities from Des Moines to Ballard. If successful, there is adequate funding to make these routes permanent. Both the state and federal governments have already pledged funding to help the ferry district establish this new service.

Passenger-only ferry service works. Last year, Elliott Bay Water Taxi ridership between downtown and West Seattle rose to more than 161,000, a 32 percent increase over the previous summer season.

Passenger ferries are a key part of the mobility solution in Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Sydney and many other cities around the world. Vancouver's "SeaBus" carries more than 5 million passengers each year. The San Francisco Bay Area Water Transit Authority, formed four years ago, now serves 4 million passengers annually with plans to expand ridership to 12 million in less than 20 years.

Passenger-only ferries can operate when highways can't. After the 1989 San Francisco earthquake closed local roadways, Bay Area communities added emergency ferry service — then kept it when it proved both popular and cost-effective.

In Seattle, last summer's temporary closure of several lanes on Interstate 5 boosted Elliott Bay Water Taxi ridership. Specific waterborne transit routes, such as the water taxi, Vashon passenger ferry and the proposed Ballard-to-downtown and Kirkland-to-University of Washington demonstration routes, will mitigate the impacts of major construction projects on the Alaskan Way and Highway 520 corridors.

Ferry routes can be established quickly and changed when needed. Ferries use a public right of way — our navigable waters — that is both free and flexible. Some 1.1 million of King County's 1.8 million residents live in cities with shorelines on either Puget Sound or Lake Washington.

Not all King County residents will use foot ferries on a regular basis, though many will. Nor does everyone ride Metro buses, visit regional parks or, for that matter, send kids to our public schools. Yet, citizens have voted to support school levies regardless of whether they have children in schools, have funded parks and open-space needs in neighborhoods far from their own, and voted just last year to enhance Metro bus service that they may never personally use. These are regional needs, funded regionally.

We support creating effective transportation alternatives, saving the current successful passenger ferry routes, and expanding mobility for frustrated commuters across King County. We support the King County Ferry District.

Dow Constantine and Jane Hague are King County Council members who serve on the King County Ferry District Board of Directors.

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