

Bothell Reporter

Water-taxi plan draws large crowd

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Mar 30 2009, 9:00 PM

Ferry District may launch special event runs as soon as this summer

On March 24, about 100 people packed the Northshore Utility District building to hear Kenmore Mayor David Baker and King County Councilmember Bob Ferguson promote the virtues of a water-taxi run between Kenmore and Seattle.

At least one observer noted a recent meeting on the future of economic development in Kenmore drew a far smaller crowd.

“The Ferry District provides a transportation alternative that utilizes the open waterway at our doorstep,” said Ferguson, who also serves on the Ferry District Board. “People are excited about the Kenmore route and this meeting was an opportunity for them to hear more details and provide input.”

“I was pleased to see the level of enthusiasm and great turnout at the meeting,” said Baker, who has been a steady and strong supporter of bringing water taxis to Kenmore. “The community is ready for a transportation option to help relieve overcrowding on buses and traffic congestion.”

The Ferry District may implement up to five water-taxi demonstration runs beginning in 2010, but, along with Renton, Kenmore seems to be in line for one of the first available boats. Judging from the March 24 discussion and past official comments, the initial Kenmore route most likely will head toward Seattle’s University District. After last week’s meeting, Ferguson said the demonstration routes will operate for about two years in order to assess their viability.

For the immediate future, Baker said Kenmore could see some special event runs leaving the city as soon as this summer. Again, the University District might be the destination. Both Baker and Ferguson talked about boats carrying fans from Kenmore to Seattle for University of Washington football games.

Travel time between Husky stadium and Kenmore was estimated at about 28 minutes.

Established in 2007 to expand water-taxi and ferry service on Lake Washington and elsewhere, the King County Ferry District formally approved funding for the five demonstrations runs in November of last year. Kenmore was in the board’s spotlight from the outset.

“Kenmore is a priority,” district Executive Director Kjristine Lund said shortly after the demonstration routes won funding. Still, several officials are continuing to caution that a Kenmore water taxi isn’t a done deal.

“It’s never for sure until it’s for sure,” said City Councilwoman Laurie Sperry.

Naturally, cost was one topic that came up several times during the meeting at the Utility District. After the session, Baker was quick to point out the water-taxi routes won’t cost Kenmore a dime.

Ferguson said fares covered about 39 percent of the 2008 operating expenses for the Ferry District’s West Seattle water taxi. Remaining dollars come from a county-wide property tax, which amounts to 5.5 percent per \$1,000 in assessed value. Ferguson noted that by comparison, fares cover only about 22 percent of the operating costs for Metro Transit bus lines.

Among those in the audience of the recent meeting, many seemed surprised to learn the West Seattle routes carried some 182,000 persons during their seven months of operation last year. Regular users accounted for 50 percent of the passengers, with tourists filling the rest of the seats.

Baker said he believes Kenmore is just kind of a natural spot for a water-taxi or ferry route. Obviously, the city boasts a major thoroughfare in the form of State Route 522, which carries plenty of bus traffic in addition to private vehicles. There is a park and ride. There is Kenmore Air.

“There just seems to be a confluence there for transportation,” Baker said.

Among residents, local real-estate agent and blogger James Lupori seems to be one of the stronger supporters of the water-taxi idea.

As did others at the recent meeting, Lupori said Kenmore seems unfortunately disconnected from its Lake Washington waterfront. While he doesn’t expect water taxis to solve the area’s transportation problems, he talked about what might be said to be the romance of having water taxis on the lake, of locals and tourists hopping on board just for the sake of a ride on the lake.

“If you build a ferry system, they will come,” Lupori said.

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