

# Kitsap Sun

## Passenger Ferry Plan Gaining Steam in King Co.

By Ed Friedrich

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SEATTLE

After struggling for more than a decade to launch a lasting passenger-only ferry system, Kitsap County might finally be getting some help from its cross-Sound neighbors.

Eastsiders outnumbered westsiders at a forum entitled "The Return of the Mosquito Fleet" Monday evening at Salty's on Alki Beach.

Routes from Kingston and Bremerton have failed, along with two Kitsap Transit elections that have fallen far short of winning support for a larger system. But foot ferries are gaining momentum on the other side of the water.

King County, already gridlocked and with massive road construction projects on tap that will tie up traffic even more, formed a ferry district this year that will tap property taxes. It plans to boost West Seattle water taxi service to year-round, take over the state's Vashon-Seattle route, pay for a demonstration boat between Kirkland and the University of Washington, fund a feasibility study of other routes and provide money for better boats and docks. It would cost King County landowners 2 to 3 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

"Compared with other modes of transportation, that's a bargain because the infrastructure is not as expensive," said King County Councilman Dow Constantine, who spearheaded the ferry district effort. "Water is free."

For 100 years, passenger ferries moved people and goods around the region, King County Council member Julia Patterson said. Service bottomed out in recent years after Washington State Ferries lost its motor vehicle excise tax funding and opted out of the foot-ferry business.

"Next year, Washington state will be out of the business and will be looking to the region and local governments to provide that service," she said. "We cannot meet that demand with a patchwork approach. We need a regional vision. We need to be thinking big and working together on this issue."

The Puget Sound Regional Council is working on a regional study of passenger ferries that is due out early next year and should answer many of the questions for the region and for Kitsap Transit.

Port Orchard mayor and Kitsap Transit board chair Kim Abel, who spoke at the forum, said that's what she's hoping for. The voters who rejected two sales tax measures for passenger ferries clearly had questions about the plans. Now, at least, Kitsap County isn't the only one looking for answers.

"We were by ourselves," Abel said. "The new thing is everybody is talking about it in the Puget Sound region."

Now the Legislature has made motor vehicle excise taxes, property taxes and sales taxes available to ferry

districts. Abel said the transit board, which still supports passenger ferries, is taking "baby steps figuring out the right partners, the right solutions and the right time."

No matter which direction it might choose, there would be a public vote, unlike in King County.

"Not only because it's political suicide but it's the right thing to do," Abel said.

In the meantime, Kitsap Transit is working with the Legislature on forming Public Benefit Authority subdistricts — possibly cities or more densely populated areas where residents use and would pay for passenger ferries. It is also trying to retain investments made in earlier efforts so expenses wouldn't be duplicated.

Poulsbo City Councilman Jim Henry said keeping traffic off his city's roads and feeding it to the Bainbridge Island ferry is a major effort.

"Poulsbo is easy to ignore, but a good lot of people go through us to get to you," he told the Seattleites.

To change drivers' habits, they have to know ferries will be there in the morning, he said.

"Hearing Jim talk about feeding passengers to the ferries, it's no wonder it didn't work," said Jon Rose of Pope Resources, which is developing 8,000 acres in North Kitsap. "We want to change habits, but we don't want to send them on a suicide run."



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