



Should King County be in the ferry business again?

The county once before ran ferries, only to be rescued by the state. Now the state is too broke to keep the passenger boats running, and the county has got the bug again. It's expensive, there are other solutions, and Vashon Islanders were once dead set against passenger-only ferries. But hey, nostalgia springs eternal.

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Is King County's plunge into the ferry business a step forward toward a transportation system for the 21st century, or a step backward toward a transportation system for the 19th?

Just in case you weren't paying attention, the King County Council voted last April to create a countywide ferry district, and voted again last month, donning new hats as the ferry district board, to impose a property tax of 5.5 cents per \$1000 to fund a ten-year program that will take over the Vashon passenger-only ferry and the Elliott Bay Water Taxi, and try at least five experimental routes on Lake Washington and Puget Sound. (Washington State Ferries currently operate the Vashon boat, and Argosy Cruises operates the water taxi under contract to the county.)

You can think Swiss navy if you like. But recall that King County is not exactly new at the ferry business. It operated the very first car ferry on Puget Sound, between Vashon Island's Portage area and Des Moines, in 1916, and kept running the ferry when it switched to a run between the north end of Vashon and Seattle three years later. At the time, according to Van Olinda's *History of Vashon-Maury Islands*, the county saw ferry service as an extension of its own road network.

The county's current scheme is commonly described as a \$220 million project. Over ten years, the county expects to spend \$140.7 million on capital projects and purchases and \$127.5 million on operations, for a grand total of \$268.4 million. It projects revenues from all sources, including fares, grants, and advertising, of \$42.3, leaving a net cost of \$226.1 million. This involves some rosy assumptions (notably \$11.6 million worth of "potential federal grants") and a lot of uncertainty; for instance, no one knows how much the 90 gallons of fuel that the current passenger ferry burns each hour will cost in 2015. There will be no major long-term financing and therefore no whopping interest costs of the kind that enabled foes to paint the Roads and Transit measure rejected last November as a \$47 billion disaster instead of the \$17.8 billion project that backers discussed.

It still represents a nice chunk of change, for not all that many riders. But County Council staffer Chris Arkills says, "I would argue that the price is not all that high." In fact, it "compares pretty well" to the cost of building a mile of freeway lane—or light rail. "\$220 million would buy you a couple of miles of light rail [or] less than a mile of freeway," he says. The biggest cost and hassle of building new roads or rail transit, Arkills says, is acquiring rights-of-way. Ferries can use the water for free.

The Washington legislature paved the way for the county action last year when it passed a statute that enabled counties to create ferry districts. The legislation was linked to a decision to keep running the Vashon passenger-only ferry to 2008, after which it would keep going only if a county ferry district took it over.

Ferry funding had depended heavily on the car tab fees that were slashed after voters passed Initiative 695 in 2001. The state supreme court quickly ruled the initiative unconstitutional, but the legislature moved even more quickly to enact the law that the voters had tried to pass. Once that happened, the passenger-only boats had no dedicated source of funding. The state subsequently dropped passenger-only service to Bainbridge Island and Bremerton, and kept Vashon service—which had already been cut back substantially—on a temporary basis.

It's ironic that keeping the passenger-only boat has become such a sacred cow of Vashon politics. The original [Vashon Community Plan](#), adopted by King County in 1981, contained a special recommendation against high-speed passenger-only service to Seattle. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vashon residents fought against passenger ferries from downtown Seattle to their island, fearing—accurately—that it would increase population pressure and accelerate gentrification. (I served on that planning committee, and I still live on Vashon.)

One factor in those days was Boeing's push to sell [high-speed hydrofoils](#). The state's Congressional delegation had obliged by pushing through a law that enabled the federal government to subsidize their purchase, and the state was eager to buy hydrofoils. But when ferry representatives encountered an overwhelmingly hostile audience on Vashon, they promptly scrapped the idea. (Ferry system officials tried to avoid a vote, but a guy in the back of the room said "I'm standing against it," and virtually every one else stood with him.)

A few years later, when the state planned passenger-only service to Vashon, Bainbridge, and Bremerton, it basically didn't ask. Over the years, even as the state has reduced service to a bare minimum, people have grown to like the convenience, and to think of it as something that's *theirs*. Try to take it away from them, and they're outraged.

Enter the county. Under the new scheme, the county at the outset would let other people run both the Vashon and Elliott Bay boats, contracting out the water taxi to Argosy or some other private bidder in the short term, and letting the state run the passenger-only boat until the middle of 2009. The state would pay for it until next June, and the county would pay for it a year after that.

Starting in the middle of 2009, the county would operate both of those boats, plus the three experimental runs, leasing boats, presumably from someone on the East Coast. Ultimately, it envisions buying a small fleet of 149-passenger catamarans capable of cruising at 30 knots. Under Coast Guard regulations, a boat carrying up to 149 passengers can get by with only two crew members. The boats could actually do 30 knots on the open Sound—depending, of course, on weather and traffic—slowing to 20 in Elliott Bay and on Lake Washington. They would be identical and therefore interchangeable, easier to substitute for each other and to maintain. Exactly who would do the maintenance isn't clear.

People discuss this as a revival of [the "mosquito fleet"](#) that tied the communities of Puget Sound together in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the beginning, the land around Puget Sound was covered with dense old-growth forests, the water led virtually everywhere, and if you wanted to go some place, you paddled—or, in the case of early white settlers, hired some Indians to paddle—there in a dugout canoe. Then, a flotilla of small steamboats started hauling people and freight all over the Sound.

This mosquito fleet kept going into World War II, but after World War I, this little navy entered an obvious decline. People were driving cars by then, governments were building good roads along the shore, and riders wanted boats that would carry their automobiles, as well as themselves. Car ferries were the wave of the future; passenger-only boats were passe. Now, they have not only taken on a kind of retro charm but they look—to some observers—like a plausible way to move people around 21 st-century gridlock.

It isn't yet clear just where the county will build its experimental terminals, how people will reach them, and where people who drive to them will park their cars. Some locations seem relatively obvious: the marina in Des Moines; the marina in downtown Kirkland or at Carillon Point. Others are more conjectural. None is blessed with a park-and-ride lot. New lots along the waterfront are as unlikely as new affordable housing there. Arkills says that any new terminal site will be at least reasonably close to a park-and-ride, and the county can operate shuttle service, just as it

does between the water taxi dock and the business district of West Seattle. The current relationship between Metro and the state ferry system seems distant at best—they're different systems; why should they talk?—but the new shuttle buses would wait for ferries, and vice versa.

Whatever this new system looks like, it's likely to last a long time, even if it doesn't work well. There's no automatic sunset, the county will have invested \$85.4 million (or more) in boats, terminals, and moorage, and once people get used to the service, it will be politically hard to kill.

Won't the county just be subsidizing ferry riders? Of course. This is public transportation. It's not designed to make a profit. Actually, Arkills says, conservative estimates suggest that fares will cover 15 to 20 percent of the operating cost—close to the 21-22 percent they cover for Metro bus riders.

Metro calculates an operating cost (before the latest rise in oil prices) of \$3.66 per bus passenger boarding against revenue of 81 cents. Multiply this times the 270 riders per day who now take the Vashon passenger-only boat, and you could bus the same people downtown from West Seattle's Fauntleroy ferry dock for only about \$200,000 a year. Of course, buses can get stuck in traffic, and one assumes that as time goes by and traffic worsens, they'll get stuck more frequently. And boats—like light rail—appeal to people who think buses are for losers. On the other hand, unlike the passenger-only boat, buses can operate in a stiff north wind.

Public operation of ferries was seen originally, in the years following World War II, as a way to keep fares low. That was always a delusion. During the War, the Black Ball Line, a private company that owned the Puget Sound ferry fleet, froze fares. After the war, Black Ball asked the state for a 30-percent increase, which was reasonable, but wildly unpopular. The state moved toward public ownership.

In the meantime, Vashon Island got the legislature to pass a law allowing it to form its own ferry district—which it did, by popular ballot, in 1948. George McCormick, who owned the hardware store at Vashon's main intersection (the building is now occupied by a restaurant called The Hardware Store), served as an island ferry commissioner. He recalled years later that the ferry district was just holding on desperately, waiting for the state to come along and rescue it. When the island's only ferry had mechanical problems, the Black Ball Line's owner, the much-reviled Captain Peabody, bailed out the ferry commissioners by filling in with Black Ball boats.

When the state finally took over, in 1951, a lot of people expected low fares forever. McCormick, who served on the Department of Transportation committee that decided what the state should charge, said that illusion was quickly shattered. At the committee's first meeting, officials including the governor and lieutenant governor wanted to raise fares a little. A representative of the Chicago company that had financed the purchase of the old Black Ball fleet told them that the state would have to raise fares a lot. It has kept raising them ever since.

County ownership won't make the system cheap, either. But at least the county will provide a dedicated source of tax funding, and it will provide an operating agency that doesn't wish the service would just go away.

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