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Will West Seattleites Get Ferry Service All Around Town?

Proposal would greatly expand the water taxi.

By Mike Seely

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Chas Redmond



Cramped quarters: the ferry in its current home.

Ask West Seattleites what they want for Christmas, and a healthy number will reply with something along the lines of "a mosquito fleet capable of ferrying us to all points in the city from the shores of Alki by the time the viaduct gets torn down." Well, West Seattle architect Vlad Oustimovitch and a handful of community leaders and planners have decided not to wait for Christmas. Instead, they've unveiled a proposal to significantly beef up existing water-taxi service and move it from Seacrest Boathouse to the much bigger Jack Block pier.

Oustimovitch says current water-taxi service is "a small pilot program. It's really hard for most people in West Seattle to use." But the pier "has potential for all-weather use and [is] expandable over time," he says. "The idea is to make [the ferry] more accessible for public transportation, and the site we've got it planned for has room for buses to be properly staged and 500 park-and-ride stalls. A 70-year-old woman living in Fauntleroy with a hip replacement can drive her big car to the lot and take it."

While he won't say exactly how many boats should be placed in rotation or how big they should be, Oustimovitch does offer the following: "The most important thing is to have a service that runs more often, rather than larger. If you know there's a boat running every 15 minutes, you won't even look at a schedule. The size of the current boats are a good size. But really, it's just a tour boat, which is probably not ideal. So ideally, the boats that will end up being used in the future will be different. Metro, in the future, almost certainly will have their own boats with their own staff." Here, Oustimovitch raises the possibility of working with the Whidbey Island manufacturer Nichols Brothers, which already provides large-capacity catamarans to the Bay Area's waterborne transportation authority.

King County Council member Dow Constantine has directed the Port of Seattle and King County to study Oustimovitch's "West Seattle Mosquito" proposal, which includes artist's renderings of different route possibilities. (You can view them on the wonderful West Seattle Blog, westseattleblog.com). A future route connecting West Seattle to Magnolia is included, but Oustimovitch says the possibilities for expansion "are endless." "I know there's been some interest expressed in having water service from Shilshole Bay to downtown," he notes.

"The advantage of a system like this is the infrastructure costs up front are minimal," adds Oustimovitch, whose most ardent political backers have been state Sen. Erik Poulsen and Seattle City Council member Jan Drago. "It's the exact opposite of the monorail, where the infrastructure costs were enormous. The water taxi, instead of billions of dollars to get in operation, it's just millions of dollars. Which, in public transportation terms, is a pretty low number."

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