

Hayes' passion for transit, ferries won believers, detractors

By Ed Friedrich

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BREMERTON — In a few weeks, Dick Hayes will fold into his little brown roadster and for the last time drive away from the agency he built.

Kitsap Transit's first and only executive director says he's leaving it in sound shape and good hands.

"I'm proud of the management staff," said Hayes, who'll be replaced by longtime service development director John Clauson. "They're going to do fine. They're a great bunch."

Voters formed a public transportation benefit area in 1982. Hayes, who helped Tacoma Transit use new PTBA laws to become Pierce Transit, was hired as Kitsap Transit's first employee on Aug. 15, 1983.

For the next 28 1/2 years, Hayes, who turned 70 on Sunday, generated the agency's vision, and assembled a bright staff to deliver it.

"Dick has always been one of the more innovative general managers," said Mike Harbor, Hayes' peer for 17 years at Olympia's Intercity Transit. "He always seemed to have interesting projects and interesting ways to go about things. Sometimes I thought it was a good idea, sometimes I wondered, but he was always moving forward, always willing to try new things, always trying to make the system better."

FROM 5 ROUTES TO 40

The agency mushroomed after beginning with five routes and 10 worker-driver buses acquired from the city of Bremerton and private operators. Now it boasts 40 routes, 30 worker-driver buses, passenger ferries, demand-response service for the elderly and disabled called Access, and 101 van pools. Ridership rocketed from 600,000 a year to 5 million and assets from \$400,000 to \$100 million.

"In terms of the system we set up, I'm pretty happy with that," Hayes said. "In terms of assets, the system is in really good shape."

The agency, long known for saving money by rehabilitating old buses instead of buying new ones, now has a modern fleet.

"People used to tease us about being a bus broker disguised as a transit system," Hayes said.

Voters approved six annexations as Kitsap Transit grew to encompass the entire county. Nearly 20 years of progress ended in 2000, however, when the agency lost license tab revenues — 43 percent of its funding. It cut service and raised fares. Voters passed a sales-tax increase to restore part of the funding, only to have the recession knock the agency back down. Local sales taxes, which comprise 80 percent of Kitsap Transit's operating costs, plummeted the past few years. The events led to a drop in ridership to 4 million.

Despite the cuts, Kitsap Transit continued to pour millions of federal dollars into passenger-only ferries. It proposed two different tax packages to support the boats. Both failed. It tried to help a private operator. After a time, that failed, too.

This year it will complete research on a low-wake boat, culminating with four months of carrying fare-paying passengers.

Ferry grants come from a pot that can only be used for ferry projects, not buses, but some people couldn't separate the two. Hayes became their piñata.

But he persists, seeing fast boats as the missing link.

"The whole time I've been here people hip to economic development said the key to high-quality growth is connections to Seattle," he said. "That's the quintessential next step for economic development. We did everything we could for downtown, but without good connections we went as far as we could go."

FIGHTING FOR FAST FERRIES

Former Bremerton mayor Cary Bozeman said Hayes could've avoided a lot of grief by dropping fast ferries.

"He didn't have to get immersed in that ferry business," Bozeman said. "That wasn't part of the Kitsap Transit mission. But he knew how important it was to this community. He led the fight to build the terminal and took on the whole issue of passenger-only ferries, which was much to his disfavor because Dick took a lot of criticism over this issue. But he remained steadfast that it was important, and he does to this day. He remains the key person to bring back passenger-only ferries."

Hayes worked with Bozeman to help revitalize downtown, particularly in building the Bremerton Transportation Center and commuter retail building.

The progressive duo often seemed to be dragging a hesitant public behind them.

"He was ahead of his time on most issues and took a lot of risks because of that," Bozeman said. "People like that are change agents. They take chances and create opposition and people are uncomfortable sometimes with it, but that's what leaders do."

They create change that's going to make the community better, and Dick's one of those kind of people."

Hayes said taking heat comes with the territory.

"If you don't have really thick skin, you shouldn't apply for jobs like this," he said. "It'll kill ya."

Rex Nelson, who has served on Kitsap Transit's citizen advisory committee since the mid-1990s, sees Hayes from a different perspective than Bozeman, but comes to much the same conclusion.

"Dick Hayes is a visionary, always trying to move the agency forward," he said, noting the transit center, regional ORCA cards and an up-to-date, handicap-accessible fleet. "In spite of criticism from many in the community, he's never given up on passenger ferries."

Sharon Gilpin of Bainbridge Island helped defeat both Kitsap Transit ferry tax proposals. She didn't like Hayes' funding strategy, but had no problem with him.

"I don't blame him for trying," she said. "Transit is important to a lot of us. We (Citizens for Affordable Transportation) just felt the sales tax wasn't the way to go about funding the passenger-only ferries. That's it. Nothing personal. I wish him well."

Kitsap Transit has excelled at putting together strong grant proposals and obtaining funding, often through the Puget Sound Regional Council. Bob Drewel, the council's executive director, said Hayes represented Kitsap County well, despite the detractors.

"Generally people in the public eye, in a position like Dick is, if they're not generating that passionate response they're not leading," he said. "I see him as a respected leader not only in their own neck of the woods but on a regional basis. He was a passionate leader for getting Kitsap at the regional table and he was very successful. ... The guy is just blessed with a relentless sense of purpose."

Hayes said he'd like to carve some time out of building boats, playing with grandkids and maintaining his 100-year-old house to stay involved with passenger-only ferries.

"I have the target on both my back and front," he said. "There's some advantage to keeping the target because obviously it doesn't bother me."



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