

Passenger ferries can't get around subsidy problem

By Ed Friedrich

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BREMERTON — Kitsap County isn't any closer to viable passenger-only ferry service than in 1986 when the Tyee began sailing between Bremerton and Seattle, but nobody wants to give up the chase. Backers fanned the boats' flickering hopes during a summit Tuesday at the Norm Dicks Government Center.

Port of Kingston is running the county's only cross-Puget Sound service, and it's struggling. SoundRunner carries about 25 riders to Seattle in the morning and 40 passengers back at night. It needs about 100 on each boat to break even, said Commissioner Pete DeBoer, one of four panelists Tuesday. The port has committed \$200,000 for each of SoundRunner's first four years, and is burning through it. It needs about a half-million dollars more a year to make a run at survival.

"Twenty-five to 40 people isn't taking the parentheses off the bottom of the balance sheet," DeBoer said. "What's the future for us? We need some money. If we could get \$500,000 a year, we could make this work."

The Port of Kingston is in great financial shape compared to most agencies. Few can support ferry service like it's doing.

"Ferry service requires a subsidy, period," said David Moseley, Washington State Ferries director and another panelist. "It will not survive strictly on fares riders will pay."

Ferry fares pay for 65 percent to 70 percent of the state ferries' operating costs. A passenger-only operation would be lucky to cover half that much.

County Commissioner Josh Brown said the approach to passenger ferries has been characteristic of Kitsap County — fragmented.

"Before anybody can provide help to the Port of Kingston, do we continue to have the county split apart on passenger ferry issues, and what are we talking about for a subsidy?" he asked.

Poulsbo Mayor Becky Erickson believes passenger-only ferries have a big future in Puget Sound, but she's nervous about sharing city money with them.

"You're all asking for subsidies," she said. "I'd like to know where you think you're going to get the money."

Brown suggested determining the most cost-effective, entry-level service and working backward to find funding. It would probably be a countywide, sales tax-supported ferry district like Kitsap Transit twice failed to pass. DeBoer said if a ferry district were formed, the port would "gladly" relinquish SoundRunner to it.

"The Port of Kingston is not married to being a passenger-only ferry operator," he said.

Kitsap Transit officials won't discuss operating plans and funding until Rich Passage research is completed in about a year. They promised not to run a ferry through the pass until they proved to property owners it works.

"The people on those shorelines are watching us very carefully," said Dick Hayes, ferry project director and another panelist Tuesday. "Another lawsuit would be the end."

As part of the research, Kitsap Transit will run the low-wake Rich Passage I between Bremerton and Seattle from June to November. The 118-passenger catamaran will make five round trips a day with tickets costing about \$3.50 each way to compete with the car ferries' \$7.50 round-trip price.

The federal government provides capital funding but little for operations. It gave Port of Kingston a \$3.5 million grant for boats and terminals, and Kitsap Transit most of the \$5.4 million for the Rich Passage I and \$8 million for wake research.

The Federal Transportation Administration "spent a lot of money on programs for both Kingston and Bremerton, and we as a county need to determine how to make it work most efficiently," DeBoer said.

What sparked Tuesday's meeting was Washington State Ferries leaving a passenger-only ferry dock out of plans to renovate Colman Dock in Seattle. Moseley suggested that passenger-only service providers get together and figure out what works best for them. If it's Colman Dock, WSF will be happy to have that conversation, but an expansion of the passenger-only dock isn't feasible.



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