

**Implementing Vision 2020...1995 Update of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan for the
Central Puget Sound Region: Marine/Ferries Component**
Puget Sound Regional Council, May 1994

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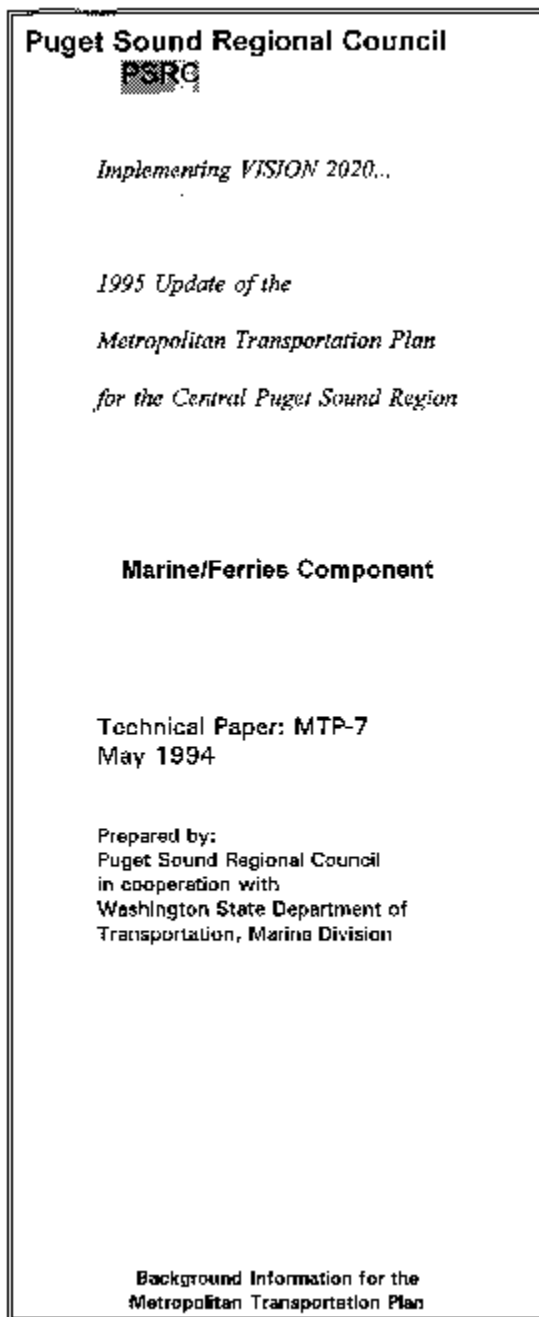
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MARINE/FERRIES COMPONENT

OVERVIEW / BACKGROUND

The ferry system functions as a set of marine highway links in the metropolitan transportation system. Since bridge alternatives have been virtually eliminated from consideration for cross Sound travel due to cost and public dissent, the ferries are an important mode for the foreseeable future to connect highway routes on each side of Puget Sound. Besides this "highway" function, the ferries are also a high capacity transit mode because of their ability to transport large numbers of people who would otherwise take a vehicle across the water. Each of the jumbo ferries can handle 2,000 walk-on passengers. Passenger-only ferries accommodate 250 to 320 passengers. In addition, the ferries connect to transit service on both sides. When these modal transfers can be timed properly, the ferries provide a seamless transportation trip. Washington State Ferries (WSF) makes it easy for carpools and vanpools to access the ferries. Registered non-SOV vehicles can use an exclusive "fast lane" to avoid traffic congestion at terminals and receive priority loading.

The ferry system also serves the freight and goods movement sector of the transportation system. Each day, auto ferries carry hundreds of trucks transporting freight across Puget Sound. Passenger-only ferries also have the potential to carry limited amounts of goods, especially small package freight. This is particularly attractive to private ferry service, and a private operator has included this capability as part of a proposal for new passenger ferry service. The mosquito fleet of the early 20th century was just such a system of freight and passenger boats.

Historical Perspective

The Puget Sound region has had some form of ferry service since the days when the first settlers reached the shores of the Sound in the 1800s. Settlement of the area demanded waterborne transportation to move people and goods. The late 19th century saw a period of tremendous growth in steamship travel, including the vast movement of steamers between Seattle and Alaska when gold was discovered in the Klondike. The peak period of passenger boat travel on Puget Sound occurred in the early 20th century. A "mosquito fleet" of steamers carried passengers and freight to numerous points on the Sound as well as Lake Washington. The heyday was relatively short-lived as the advent of the automobile gradually diminished the need for a fleet of passenger boats. In its place came the highway network and a new fleet of auto ferries.

The auto ferries were run by several private companies until 1951, when the last of the private ferries ceased operation. Seeing a need to continue ferry operations, the State of Washington took over operation of the fleet. Today, the Washington State Ferries is the largest ferry system in the United States.

Current System

The Marine Division of the Washington State Department of Transportation presently operates ferries on 10 routes with 25 vessels (8 routes in the four-county region). Two of the routes serve foot passengers only. In 1992, the ferry system carried more than 23 million riders (includes vehicle drivers, vehicle passengers and foot passengers). In addition to routes and vessels, the

system includes terminals (buildings and docking facilities), intermodal connections, parking lots, and maintenance facilities.

Two non-state ferry routes are also included in the existing regional system. One is run by a private operator, the other by Pierce County.

The Routes

Central Puget Sound ferry routes serve both vehicles and the walk- on passengers. The ferries operate as extensions of the state highway system, taking vehicles across the Sound on "marine" highways. The ferries also act as a mass transit system and serve a growing foot passenger population who commute to jobs and go to recreational, shopping, and entertainment destinations on both sides of Puget Sound. Population and employment are growing in Kitsap County, on the west side of the Sound, spurring an increasing number of both work and non-work trips to King, Snohomish, and Pierce counties on the east side. Growth in population on the east side has led to increased weekend recreation travel demand. The following is a short description of each route:

Clinton-Mukilteo: This route serves to connect the population of south Whidbey Island to Snohomish County on the mainland. It serves a large commuter segment going to the Boeing Company facility near Everett, as well as recreational travel to Whidbey Island.

Kingston-Edmonds: This is the fastest growing route in the system, and both communities are grappling with the accompanying increased traffic. Demand for service is driven by population increases in Snohomish and Kitsap counties, and by travel to destinations on the Olympic Peninsula. Significant terminal improvements, including relocation, are being considered for Edmonds.

Seattle-Bainbridge Island: This route carries the largest number of riders, both vehicle drivers and foot passengers, in the system. The growing population of Bainbridge Island and north Kitsap County is a strong factor in the commuter trip segment. This is also the primary gateway for travel between Seattle and the Olympic Peninsula.

Seattle-Bremerton: The Bremerton terminal has undergone substantial improvement over the last few years to enhance the attractiveness of the downtown area to commuters and tourists. This is the longest route across central Puget Sound and it serves job destinations in downtown Seattle and Bremerton, notably the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. A passenger ferry route also serves to connect the cities, although ridership has fallen recently due to slow vessel speeds, reliability problems, and a reduction in employment at the Naval Shipyard.

Fauntleroy-Vashon-Southworth: This route serves the Kitsap Peninsula, Vashon Island, and central and south King County. A significant portion of the ridership is commuters to south lag County employment centers.

Seattle-Vashon Island: A passenger only vessel serves to connect island residents to downtown Seattle.

Point Defiance-Tahlequah: This route connects southern Vashon Island to Tacoma. It is currently the only ferry route serving Tacoma.

Steilacoom-Anderson Island-Ketron Island: This route is operated by Pierce County to connect island residents to mainland destinations.

Port Orchard-Bremerton-Retsil: A private company, Horluck Transportation, provides ferry service to meet commuter demand between these communities.

Vessels

The 25-boat, 7-class WSF fleet ranges from the jumbo class ferries, with a capacity of 2,000 passengers and over 200 autos, to the Hiyu, a 40-auto, 200-passenger boat. In the regional system, the jumbos operate on the busy Seattle-Bainbridge Island run; at the other extreme, the 65-car, 540-passenger Rhododendron handles the comparatively low ridership on the Point Defiance-Tahlequah service. Two passenger-only ferries were put into service in 1990, each with a 250-person capacity. Three additional jumbo ferries are scheduled to be constructed and in service by 1997. With limited backup vessels for the fleet, downtime for refurbishment or emergency repair creates serious service disruptions and convenience problems for state ferry users. The Pierce County ferry service connecting Steilacoom with Anderson and Ketron islands uses two vessels, the larger a 30-auto, 149-passenger boat. That will be replaced soon with a new 54-car, 250-passenger ferry. Five small boats are used on the private ferry service connecting Port Orchard and Bremerton, including one that is listed on a national historic register.

Terminals and Other Facilities

The Colman Dock terminal in Seattle is the "flagship" facility in the ferry system. Half of the eight state routes in the region have Seattle as a terminus. The terminal is in the middle of a major reconstruction project designed to keep pace with increasing demand as well as address access needs of non-auto users (transit, pedestrian, and bicycle). New vehicle holding areas and slip facilities have been completed; new passenger-only vessel facilities will be under contract soon. A new terminal building has just been completed at Kingston. Other major planned improvements are being advanced by WSF.

System Ridership Trends

Ridership on the Washington State Ferries has risen steadily since the State took over operation of the ferries in 1951. Between 1960 and 1990, the number of riders on the eight routes serving the four-county region increased from 6.4 million to 19 million. From 1982 to 1992, ridership rose 42 percent as the region's economy improved dramatically. Recent trends, however, point to a leveling off of this upward march in the near future. Reflecting a depressed regional economy, system ridership went down slightly between July 1992 and June 1993, including a 5 percent drop in Seattle-Bremerton patrons. In addition to economic problems, vessel capacity has reached its limits and will not improve until the three jumbo ferries become operational by 1997. Resolution of important policy issues related to capacity and demand will determine the amount of ridership change during the coming decades. Ridership has also declined on the private Horluck ferries due to falling employment levels at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. In contrast, the Anderson/Ketron Island service in Pierce County has been showing a recent ridership

increase of between 5 and 10 percent per year, due in part to growth in retirement and vacation homes.

RELATIONSHIP TO VISION 2020 AND CONTEMPLATED INVESTMENTS

VISION 2020 includes a number of new passenger-only ferry routes (135 route miles), reconstruction/relocation of terminals, improved transit service connections to facilities, and improved access for bicycle and pedestrian modes. One of the recommended passenger-only routes, Vashon Island to downtown Seattle, began service shortly after VISION 2020 was completed. Two other recommended routes, Kingston to Seattle and Southworth to Seattle, are planned for service under a new passenger-only program recommended by the Washington State Transportation Commission. Vessels could begin serving those communities as early as 1997 if funding is approved by the Legislature and permitting issues are resolved. A private operator has proposed serving another recommended route: Clinton to Everett to Edmonds to Seattle. However, funding sources have not been secured.

Major near-term improvements to terminals are programmed by WSF for Bremerton, Bainbridge Island, Clinton, and Edmonds. Relocation of the Edmonds terminal to a new multimodal facility with rail and bus is under discussion.

Auto ferry improvements are recommended on four routes in VISION 2020. The three new jumbo ferries would not only directly improve capacity on the Bainbridge Island-Seattle route and Edmonds-Kingston route, but would allow a small amount of capacity enhancement on all routes as vessels are reassigned.

MAJOR ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

It is apparent from the above system description that ferry service is an integral part of the region's transportation network. The ferry system links highways in the region to enable the movement of people and goods. At the same time, it carries large numbers of walk-on passengers to work and recreational destinations. It has done so since early in this century. But the growth of automobile usage and its accompanying effects of congestion, resource depletion, and over-reliance on one mode of transportation are causing planners, elected officials, and the public to reconsider the status quo.

In a sense, we are entering a new era in transportation not only in this region but in the nation as a whole. The federal Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) as well as state (Growth Management Act) and local efforts (our current VISION 2020 plan) are framing the way we are going to view our transportation system in the future. All of these policy documents are aimed at the goal of a multimodal transportation system: a system that deemphasizes automobile use and provides reasonable alternatives for travel, such as bus, rail, ferry, bicycle, pedestrian and other modes. All modes must be interrelated and interconnected. This is the metropolitan transportation system that the ferry service must be a part of.

Demand for service and new ferry routes increases with the growth of population and employment. This creates pressure on WSF to meet demand through additional capacity. Current

demand creates boat overload situations at many terminals during peak and seasonal periods. Vehicle capacity on the fleet of ferries has been reached; no new boats are expected until at least 1996. By year 2000, three new jumbo ferries are expected to be operating and will provide some relief on all routes. This is because boats on current jumbo routes will be replaced and moved to other routes in the system, adding somewhat to overall system capacity. However, there is no long-term WSF program for additional auto ferry capacity beyond these three vessels.

As a result, the issue of overloads and waiting for ferries is one the state will need to address in relation to its ability to meet future demand. WSF is in the process of developing a level-of-service standard for ferries as required under the Growth Management Act. Alternatives to expensive auto ferries are also being explored. A proposed program to purchase seven new passenger-only ferries within the next eight years would serve several purposes. It would add people-carrying capacity to the system and at the same time address the need to offer an alternative to taking an automobile across Puget Sound.

The ferry system is effected by a desire from private operators to initiate ferry service on certain routes. Bond covenant restrictions which acted to disallow private operations within specific distances of the state ferry routes have now been eliminated. A few private operators also have permits from the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission to operate ferry service. Private ferries could provide a portion of the capacity need while not being wholly public supported (some subsidy is likely necessary).

Other waterborne transportation may influence the ferry service's operations in the future. The Ports of Seattle and Tacoma are continuing to increase their share of the cargo container trade on the West Coast. As trade continues to increase, ship traffic on Puget Sound waters could become a factor affecting ferry schedules and access to terminal facilities. Congestion of ship traffic around WSF terminals will need to be addressed to maintain the system's ability to provide convenient, on-time service to riders.

The availability of convenient access to ferries is an important issue to pedestrians and bicyclists as well as auto users. Parking availability at ferry terminals is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, ample parking at reasonable prices enables persons to park their car and walk on the ferry; but it can also lead to increased traffic congestion near terminals. Overall, the price of parking is not a factor in limiting ferry use now; the non-availability of parking at certain terminals is. An increasing segment of the ferry population is composed of pedestrians and bicyclists. Access to many terminals has not been conducive to use of these modes. A plan is now underway to improve the Colman Dock terminal in Seattle for access by transit users, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Overhead loading of walk-on passengers is an incentive to these ferry riders to use the service. Currently, Seattle, Bainbridge Island, Bremerton, and Kingston offer this improved access; other terminals will require separation of autos and walk-ons as needs increase.

A major factor affecting ferry services revolves around funding and fare pricing. State mandates require the system to recover 60 percent of its operating costs through farebox revenue. The remaining 40 percent comes from a combination of state sources: the gas tax, motor vehicle excise tax, and vehicle license fees. Any downturn in economic conditions in the region, as well as a slight decline in ridership, may place farebox revenues in jeopardy of falling below required

levels. WSF initiated a review of the system's fare structure in 1991. A fare increase for overweight vehicles to be phased in over a three--year period was approved in 1993. An across-the board fare increase on all routes and for all types of users to keep pace with inflation has been approved by the Transportation Commission. In addition, various demand management measures are being studied.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR ISSUES

Some of the important issues facing the regional ferry system have been referred to above. Here is a recap of these issues to be addressed in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan/VISION 2020 update:

Demand on the System: The state ferry system cannot meet current vehicle demand during certain peak and seasonal periods, yet the ferries must continue to serve a growing population, increasing recreation and increasing tourism on both sides of Puget Sound. Will this demand be satisfied through more auto or passenger ferries or will it go un-met? What service level will the state and the region decide is appropriate and acceptable?

ISTEA Planning Environment: The ferries must address often complex connections to other modes besides autos, such as transit, pedestrians and even freight. As key parts of the region's multimodal transportation system, terminal facilities require careful evaluation and planning to handle access and connectivity.

Implementation Issues

The Role of the Private Sector: The ferry system is affected by a desire from private operators to initiate ferry service on certain routes. Earlier bond covenant restrictions which acted to disallow private operations within specific distances of the state ferry routes have now been eliminated. A few private operators also have permits from the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission to operate ferry service. Private ferries could fulfill a portion of marine travel capacity requirements while potentially requiring little public financial support (some subsidy would likely be necessary for fleet and terminal developments).

Growth in Ports Traffic: Other waterborne transportation may also affect the ferry service's operations in the future. The Ports of Seattle and Tacoma are continuing to increase their share of the cargo container trade on the West Coast. As trade continues to increase, ship traffic on Puget Sound waters could become a factor affecting ferry schedules and access to terminal facilities. Congestion of ship traffic around Washington State Ferry terminals would need to be addressed to maintain the system's ability to provide convenient, on-time service to riders.

Funding Concerns: A major fare increase is under discussion to keep ferry rider revenues in line with state requirements. Such modifications to the fare structure should be well coordinated with other adjacent transit systems and regional transportation and growth management policies.