



NORTH SOUND TRANSPORTATION ALLIANCE (NSTA)

PROCEEDINGS FROM THE JULY 9, 2021 PANEL: NEXT STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING NORTH SOUND PASSENGER FERRY ROUTES

Report date: July 28, 2021

INTRODUCTION

The North Sound Transportation Alliance (NSTA) is a coalition of citizens, elected officials, and agency staff from Washington State's five northwestern-most counties: Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan, Island, and Snohomish. NSTA strives to improve ways for people to travel in the region by pursuing the following objectives: 1) Collect travel and system data to identify needs; 2) Improve regional connections and sustain and expand services; 3) Enhance mobility through sustainable, equitable, and innovative transportation solutions; 4) Inform the public about transportation services to enhance awareness of the regional transportation network.

The goal of the July 9 Panel: Next steps for implementing North Sound passenger-only ferry routes, was to hear the views of regional passenger ferry operators and key stakeholders and identify strategies for implementing services on North Sound routes identified in the recently completed Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) study.

THE PSRC PASSENGER ONLY FERRY STUDY

The discussion was based on conclusions drawn in the 2020 Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) Puget Sound Passenger-Only Ferry Study. This study evaluated the potential feasibility of new passenger only ferry (POF) services to connect communities throughout the Puget Sound area. Initially, 45 route combinations were considered. Routes were assessed in a stepped approach, with potential routes and landings moving forward for further analysis based on the findings of each step. 36 routes were analyzed in Step Two, 18 in Step Three, leading to 7 routes that were analyzed in the greatest detail.

Of the routes that received full analysis, two are in the NSTA region: the Whidbey – Everett route and the Bellingham – Friday Harbor route.

In the analysis of both routes, the report states “the first step toward implementation is identifying a lead agency that will plan, fund, implement and manage the POF route. Following this identification, the selected agency will need to complete the actions required for start-up of any POF service.”¹

The study's recommended start-up actions include:

¹ Puget Sound Regional Council, Puget Sound Passenger Only Ferry Study, Jan. 2021 (<https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/210127-pof-study-report-only.pdf>)

- Incorporate route and facilities in the local planning framework
- Route-specific actions and evaluations including tribal coordination, identification of landing sites, environmental impacts, and prioritization of equity
- Develop a business and implementation plan

RELEVANT REGIONAL EXPERIENCES

The first portion of the July 8 discussion focused on what lessons can be learned from the experiences of two currently operating POF services, one publicly owned, and one privately owned.

KITSAP FAST FERRY

John Clauson, Executive Director of Kitsap Transit, provided an overview of the Kitsap Fast Ferry, operated as part of the services provided by Kitsap Transit. His presentation answered the following questions:

1. What was the original plan for the Kitsap ferry service and how does it differ from what you have today?
2. What lessons are the most valuable to pass on to agencies developing these new routes?
3. What are the demographics of your riders?

BLAKE ISLAND FAST FERRY SERVICE

Kevin Clark, CEO & President of Argosy Cruises, discussed the evolution of the Blake Island Marine State Park service and the purchase of a fast ferry initially for moving staff. The COVID-19 epidemic forced the company to evaluate how to operate with minimal tourism and developed the fast ferry commuter service for those visiting the island. His discussion answered the following questions:

1. What was the business model for implementing the Blake Island pilot project?
2. What are the costs involved in transforming a tourist service to a commuter ferry service?
3. What are the regulatory challenges in transitioning a tourist service to a commuter ferry service?

QUESTIONS FOR PORTS AND TRANSIT AGENCIES

A set of questions was also prepared for the NSTA region ports and transit agencies that could potentially have a role providing service on the subject routes.

QUESTIONS FOR PORT AUTHORITIES

1. If a proposal for passenger ferry service could fit into the port mission, would the port support such a service?
2. If there was a passenger ferry service operating out of your facilities, what changes to the operations or facility itself would be needed (if any)?
3. What concerns does the port have about such a service?

QUESTIONS FOR TRANSIT AGENCIES

1. If there was a passenger ferry that connected to a facility in your service area, could you connect to it with the existing transit service? If not, what changes would need to be made?
2. What are the costs associated with providing transit service to passenger ferry terminals?

WHIDBEY TO EVERETT

PORT OF EVERETT

Jeff Lindhout, Chief of Marina Operations for the Port of Everett noted that the Port is interested in ferry service and sees many benefits. However, the port is also the facility that will need the most improvements before accommodating POF service. In addition to replacing aging infrastructure, float and electrical upgrades, and the continuing need for dredging, the port also has insufficient parking.

EVERETT TRANSIT

Tom Hingson, Director of Everett Transit, reported that the agency currently serves the existing ferry terminal and the port and can increase service to the Port with better transit access. There are benefits to transit in having the POF service out of the Port, given the existing route for the state ferry service is less efficient in terms of transit travel time. Other than some changes in where transit would meet the port and frequency of service, Everett Transit would be able to accommodate POF operations.

PORT OF S. WHIDBEY

Curt Gordon, Commissioner, and Stan Reeves, CEO for the Port of South Whidbey both addressed questions raised during the panel. The Port is amenable to offering POF service and has the walkway and service areas needed. The port would need some facility improvements to accommodate ferries, and ADA accessibility would need to be improved. The Port is seeking a grant to create a POF-ready facility and hoping they may time improvements with the WA State Ferry terminal electrification improvements at Clinton to reduce costs. Parking is also an issue they are currently working to address.

ISLAND TRANSIT

Shawn Harris, Operations Manager for Island Transit, said that Island Transit already provides regularly scheduled service to the Port and WA State ferry terminal and can connect with future ferry services as needed. Sunday service would need to be added into the schedule, but that is currently in planning.

BELLINGHAM TO FRIDAY HARBOR

PORT OF BELLINGHAM

John Michener, Economic Development Specialist at the Port of Bellingham, reported that the Port is interested in the mobility, tourism, and accessibility that a POF between Bellingham and San Juan County would provide. The Port is also fully capable of having such a service operate out of its facilities. The Port currently operates the terminal for the Alaska Marine Highway service out of its Fairhaven facility and could easily accommodate additional ferry services.

WHATCOM TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

Tim Wilder, Planning Director for WTA noted that WTA currently serves the Port of Bellingham's facilities, including the ferry terminal, and would be able to consider adjustments to its schedule based on incoming ferry service from San Juan County.

PORT OF FRIDAY HARBOR

Todd Nicholson, Executive Director for the Port of Friday Harbor, informed the attendees that the Port of Friday Harbor is also fully capable of adding POF service to its existing operations.

POF READINESS CHART

Based on feedback from this panel, the status of regional facilities and transit connections/connections with transportation network companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft are listed below:

	WHIDBEY – EVERETT (Island Co – Snohomish Co)	BELLINGHAM – FRIDAY HARBOR (Whatcom Co – San Juan Co)
PORT FACILITIES	Whidbey facilities NEED MINOR IMPROVEMENTS Everett facilities NEED MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS	Bellingham port facilities READY TO GO Friday Harbor facilities READY TO GO
TRANSIT/OTHER CONNECTIVITY	Whidbey transit (Island Transit) has EXCELLENT CONNECTIVITY but would need Sunday service; TNCs AVAILABLE Everett Transit CONNECTED but needs better access; TNCs AVAILABLE	Bellingham transit (WTA) CONNECTED; TNCs AVAILABLE Friday Harbor has SEASONAL TRANSIT only, although could change; TNCs NOT AVAILABLE , limited taxi service

DISCUSSION ON NEXT STEPS

The panelists discussed what would be the priority for continuing actions.

- WA state law allows counties to form ferry districts (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=36.54.110>)
- It may be possible to have a ferry district extend across multiple counties, though this will need to be investigated.
- Kitsap transit originally sought to create a separate ferry taxing district separate from its PTBA taxing district but was later encouraged to combine the two so that people who travel into the area from rural portions of the PTBA had an opportunity to vote on it. State law allows a PTBA to collect up to 9/10ths for bus service and 4/10ths for a ferry operation. Kitsap currently collects 8/10ths and 3/10ths respectively.
- It is important to confirm this is what these communities want. If their agencies are going to spend that money, it must be a priority for them. The costs for running a ferry for under 149 passengers a day (any larger would require higher regulatory compliance and operations costs) is equal to or more than three bus services. That trade-off may not be worth it for the community, especially if the route is seen as discretionary (e.g., if the Friday Harbor – Bellingham route is considered a tourism route only). For Kitsap, there was initial interest, but the community didn't support it until a high-speed vessel could be developed that wouldn't damage beaches. Their process included hiring a consultant to build a business plan to put forward to voters. This took a year to build the plan; a year to present it to voters and receive community input to refine what they wanted; and lastly the formation of a community citizen group that campaigned for the concept.
- Transit agencies noted that if the community expressed interest and support and wanted to pay taxes for it, then there would need to be a look at governance.

- Even if a public transit agency oversees it, it may be beneficial to have a private company operate it. They will already have the equipment, expertise, and staff.
- Although the PSRC study mentions the need to identify a lead “agency”, the interested organizing party could also be a private sector company or a collaborative effort.
- The success of the Kitsap model came about because they offered routes that differed from what WA State Ferries was offering, and a faster service. These commuters wanted more direct and faster service. That said, it still took three ballot attempts to pass it.
- Operators of POF routes encouraged the region to seek standard designs – a standard docking mechanism for a standard vessel that could be easily swapped out, for more affordable ongoing maintenance and vessel-swapping, maybe even between the two routes.
- One suggestion is to run a pilot project to give communities a taste of what such a service could provide. However, the infrastructure needed to facilitate a pilot project may make this idea unrealistic.

NEXT STEPS

1. Assess community support for these POF routes
2. Incorporate consideration/planning of these routes in regional planning organizations

Determining community appetite for POF service is a big issue. In the case of Kitsap, a consulting agency developed a specific marketing plan for the concept. However, currently there is no funding identified for even conducting this basic market research, so the jurisdictions/agencies at the four subject terminal locations (Bellingham/Whatcom County, Friday Harbor/San Juan County, Clinton/Langley/Island County, Everett/Snohomish County) may need to work with their regional planning organizations to coordinate funding requests for phased evaluation of service types, partnership models, and revenue options.

MORE INFORMATION

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