

Dear Congressman Murray and Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission Members

Reference: WUTC TS 042184

Why are you, Congressman Murray, wasting your time relooking at the role Washington State Ferries should play in providing foot ferry service between Southworth and Vashon and Seattle? The Legislature bailed out of that area for good reasons and should stay out. It is the plain and simple truth that the Washington State Legislature cannot be relied upon to provide foot ferry service from Southworth. Just ask Senator Oke, who busted his buns to get that service started, only to have the great charlatan Tim Eyman pull the rug out from under that service with his tax cutting initiatives. Moreover, the political climate for support of the State Ferry System ebbs and flows with each changing Legislature, and budgetary constraints brought on by fluctuating degrees of business health combine with those changes in Legislative temperament to render continued support very questionable. So, when push comes to shove, the State Ferry System and in particular a foot ferry system will become the whipping boys for all of those Legislators who could care less about the fortunes of foot ferry passengers.

Lest you not forget, this is not about whether or not the State Ferry System might find some revenues siphoned off to a competing private/Kitsap Transit foot ferry system between Harper and Southworth; rather, it is about you and your peers in the Legislature doing your very best to ensure that private foot ferries provide the service that the citizenry needs. That is what we taxpayers expect from you. Please do not forget that.

You Commissioner members will soon find yourselves bombarded with protests from local Harper area residents regarding the implementation of foot ferry service from Harper to Seattle. These protests are based only on emotion, fear and anger, and they cannot be justified by objective analysis. I urge you to be very circumspect in your reading of them.

The following Editorial that appeared in the Sunday 23 January edition of the *Bremerton Sun* covers this issue far better than I can. I hope you read it and seriously factor it into your mind set before you proceed any further with your ill-thought out plan to relook at State-provided foot ferry service.

Regards,
Chuck Hower

1/23/05: State should stay out of foot ferries

January 23, 2005

The realities of 12 years of sporadic passenger-only ferry service have made it painfully clear the state should stay out of it.

In fact, Washington State Ferries officials made it clear they wanted to get out of the passenger-only business in 2003, when Kitsap Transit was submitting an election tax levy to pay for a fleet of small, fast foot ferries between Seattle and Kitsap County ports.

The state pulled the financial plug on the problematic Bremerton-Seattle foot ferry, and said it planned to do the same thing with the Vashon-Seattle passenger-only ferry this summer.

Now — belatedly — ferries officials and the state Transportation Commission seem to be rekindling their romance with foot ferries. Perhaps, a more apt analogy is a shotgun wedding.

A private firm, Pacific Boat Enterprises, has applied to the state Utilities and Transportation Commission for a certificate to provide foot-ferry service from Harper, in South Kitsap, to Seattle.

And abruptly, the state has a renewed interest in passenger-only ferries. Half of the Vashon-Seattle foot ferry's riders come from South Kitsap, they say.

But on Tuesday, Alice Tawresey of the Marine Transportation Association of Kitsap told transportation commissioners the state should stay out of the foot ferry business and let local agencies and private operators take the helm.

And she's right. Leveraging resources with Kitsap Transit, private operators are providing passenger-only ferry service on Bremerton-Seattle and Kingston-Seattle runs. In the near future, Kitsap Transit may provide a high-speed foil-assisted fast foot ferry for a trial period on the Bremerton-Seattle route, allowing 30-minute crossings.

But not if state ferries and transportation officials have anything to say about it. A letter from the House Transportation Committee advises the UTC that a state-funded Seattle-Vashon-Southworth foot ferry will be a "major policy issue" this legislative session, and asking commissioners to defer a decision on granting a Harper-Seattle certificate until after this Legislature.

Got that? The state is facing a \$1.6 billion budget shortfall. Ferries officials previously said they wanted out of the foot-ferry business, and made them a non-priority for funding. It's previously been argued the state DOT shouldn't even be in the foot-ferry business because the ferries are, officially, part of the state's marine highway system — that is, for transporting vehicles.

But never mind all that. Because the state might begin Southworth-Vashon-Seattle foot ferry, far less convenient for Kitsapers than a nonstop Harper-Seattle run, and because — in a turnaround from previous years — it might even be able to get funding for it, officials are playing obstructionist to a private operator.

The fact is, Washington State Ferries isn't in control of its own helm. A few years back, a performance audit noted that it served too many masters — unions, the Legislature, the Transportation Commission and about a half-dozen more. Because of that, funding and operations are liable to be disrupted by too many "outside" factors, and WSF essentially can't trim its own ship in some critical areas.

By comparison, Kitsap Transit and private operators are smaller, localized, and can more effectively provide ferry service tailored to the community's needs, not the state's. Ferry riders would be far better served if the state put its efforts into adequately funding existing car ferries, rather than renewing its costly, failed experiment with passenger-only service.