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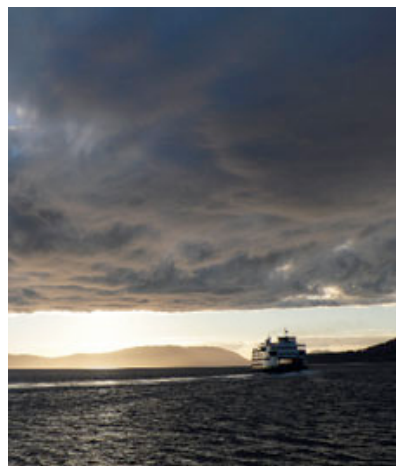
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All hands on deck

Businesspeople and local residents are joining the fight to save the Anacortes-Sidney ferry run




Dark clouds are looming for the Anacortes-Sidney ferry run as the state threatens to cut the international route.

By Amanda Baltazar

Taking the ferry from Anacortes to Sidney, British Columbia, is one of the summertime joys of living in Washington state. The two-hour journey, which takes passengers through the San Juan Islands to Vancouver Island, carried, 131,600 passengers in 2006, some of them traveling to the Washington islands, but 83 percent of them making the international trip, according to a report from E.D. Hovee & Co. commissioned by the Economic Development Association of Skagit County.

Journeys such as these could soon be coming to an end due to a proposal by

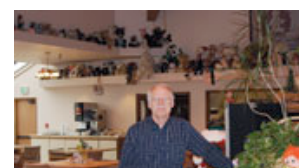


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Washington State Ferries and Gov. Christine Gregoire to eliminate the ferry route. The ramifications are enormous. Businesses that rely on tourism, especially hotels and restaurants, will lose substantial revenue, jobs will be lost, and a vital link with Canada will also be severed.

“The Anacortes to Sidney ferry route is a jewel in the Northwest,” said Don Wick, executive director of the Economic Development Association of Skagit County. “It’s such a unique way to connect two countries, via the marine highway.” And it’s often the preferred way to travel. The Hovee report points out that 5 percent of all tourism activity in the northern Puget Sound region is directly attributable to visitors originating from Vancouver Island. And these same people generate \$80.2 million in tourism spending per year.

It’s not just tourism. The report showed that the ferry affects, directly and indirectly, some 1,470 jobs with more than \$30 million in annual payroll and nearly \$126 million in annual spending in counties including Skagit, Whatcom, Island, San Juan and Snohomish. The ferry route also pays \$4.6 million in taxes to the state of Washington every year.

“The ferry run does not cost money, it makes money,” said Duane Clark, committee chair of the Anacortes Ferry Advisory Committee.

“Clearly the ferry run is an important regional economic driver. The risk is that the myopic cash-box fare recovery view overwhelms the large sales, employment and tax contribution of this marine highway,” said Mitch Everton, executive director of the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce.

“We need to fight hard to save what we’ve worked hard to create,” said Anacortes Mayor Dean Maxwell. “It would be extremely short-sighted to let this go.” His counterpart in Victoria, B.C., Mayor Dean Fortin, agreed: “It’s an economic link that serves both of our communities. We’re hoping that the Washington State Legislature will see this as a key strategic investment. Retaining the Sidney-Anacortes ferry will stimulate the economy on both sides of the border.”

There’s also the cultural ties to take into account, said Everton. Anacortes and Sidney are sister cities, which creates strong connections between the cities. And there’s an emotional impact as families with relatives on either side of the international divide are left without easy transportation.

“The sister cities’ relationship is a natural link because it’s easy to get back and forth, and it would be a sad loss from a community standpoint,” said Mayor Larry Cross of Sidney.

Two dismal options

But why the Anacortes-Sidney route and not another? It’s the smallest route in the system in terms of the vehicles and the passengers carried, said David Moseley, assistant secretary of Washington State Ferries. And because it’s a long journey, the fuel costs are high.

Washington State Ferries is putting forward two options for the future of the ferry system. Option A keeps the business almost status quo (it includes some vessel improvements) and includes a \$3.5 billion deficit over the next 22 years. Option B has a smaller deficit of \$1.4 billion and trims down the service, including eliminating the Anacortes to Sidney route, effective September 2009, and reducing service to the San Juan Islands.

And while there’s some opposition to Option A, Clark pointed out why it’s even less feasible than stated: Washington State Ferries anticipates an increase of 36 percent in overall ridership over the next 22 years, and a massive 78 percent increase on the Anacortes-Sidney route. This means, said Clark, that Option A is a progressive reduction in service as ridership increases, and Option B is a drastic step backwards in service.

Option A also includes replacing 10 vessels and adding a standby ship, which is deemed a necessity, rather than a luxury, while five boats would be replaced under Option B. If the Sidney ferry is taken out of international service, it will replace the oldest vessel in the domestic fleet, said Moseley.

“The gap between Plan A and B is almost exactly the amount we need to



Duane Clark, chairman of the Anacortes Ferry Advisory Committee, is campaigning heavily to keep the Anacortes-Sidney run, in between operating his nursing homes.

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recapitalize our assets,” he added.

As for building new boats for the ferry system, once again there’s a road-block: Under Washington state law any new boat has to be sourced within the state, which means the ferry system lessens the likelihood of a competitive bid. The same law also precludes Washington State Ferries from receiving any federal funding to pay for boats.

There are moves afoot, however, to temporarily hold this law so that a boat could be sourced from out-of-state.

“What’s important is that we need competition because these vessels are very expensive,” said Moseley.

#### Locals rally to save run

But what’s most important to local businesses and residents is simply keeping the ferry run.

There are vociferous arguments for retaining it and people are working hard. In Anacortes, there have been a number of public hearings and the Ferry Advisory Committee has visited Olympia to meet with legislators and to Sidney to participate in a save-the-ferry rally.

This group has also created a Web site, [www.saveourferry.net](http://www.saveourferry.net), to draw attention to the plight; it also features news, information and letters from prominent community members. It’s printed posters, postcards, business cards, T-shirts and sweatshirts highlight the campaign.

And the result of all this campaigning will be discovered soon, probably on April 26, the last day of the legislative session, said Mosley.

“Our joint goal is to come out of the session with a plan and a funding scenario of how we expect to achieve that plan,” he said. And the plan, he said, will be to make sure the ferry system is financially sustainable for the next 22 years.

Washington State Ferries has been operating the international ferry route since 1951, but there have been four attempts to discontinue service since then. The last big push to terminate the route was in 1997, which, Wick said, “was pretty good training for today, and when we started out, I don’t think there was a lot of hope to save that run.”

In 2006, 16 weeks of ferry transportation was permanently cut between the United States and Canada during the winter months.

But now, the fear is that if the ferry crossing is cancelled, it will be gone forever. This is not necessarily true, said Moseley, “although I do understand that fear because if you’re not using a terminal it becomes less operational. That’s not a problem with Anacortes because it still services the San Juan Islands. If we went away from Sidney, I don’t know if B.C. ferries has any interest in using that terminal.”

Duane Clark is determined to restore the ferry run to its former glory. “My goal is not just to save what we have, but to restore what we had, and we know [the ferry run] has been undermined by the changes in the services,” he said.

Getting rid of the ferry run, said Mayor Maxwell, “makes as much sense as quitting your job to save lunch money.”

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