

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2007

Ferries summit aims to anchor consensus

▼ *State, local leaders to meet in Bremerton on Dec. 7.*

By CHARLES MELTON
Bremerton Patriot

BREMERTON — Leaders from across the Puget Sound and the state will converge on the Norm Dicks Government Center in Bremerton on Dec. 7 with one thing on their minds: finding solutions to the myriad of problems faced by the Washington State Ferries system.

The Puget Sound Leadership Ferry Summit is slated to begin at 8 a.m. at the government center and is being hosted by the Kitsap Regional Coordinating Council as 130 leaders will begin tackling the issues facing WSF. The event is set to conclude at 4:30 p.m.

"This summit is a first step in attempting to build a better partnership and a better understanding around Puget Sound about the very complicated issues that we are dealing with," said 23rd District Rep. Christine Rolfes (D-Bainbridge Island), who was among those who spearheaded the organization of the event. "One main goal is to get our communities more actively engaged in the discussions. I'm hopeful that proposals to do just that will come out of the discussions."

Fellow 23rd District Rep. Sherry Appleton (D-Poulsbo) agreed the summit is a vital step in addressing the system's problems.

"It is important to get people together to discuss the issues and look for solutions," she said. "At the end of the meeting I will

be hoping that everyone has a better idea of what is facing the ferry system and its commuters."

This past year the state Legislature passed a major ferry reform bill that capped fare increases and slowed terminal expansion plans until the ferry's financial house is in order, Rolfes said.

"It requires a fresh look at capital projects, ridership trends, fare pricing policies and whether there are more efficient ways to use existing capacity," she said. "Capital needs were driving up fares with no end in sight, and the legislation basically said enough is enough."

As state and local leaders look at the ferry system's future, the local communities most impacted by the system need to be more actively at the table, communicating their needs and understanding the implications of the findings, Rolfes said.

While each community served by the state ferry system is unique, there are issues which are faced by everyone including Bainbridge, Bremerton and Whidbey Island, she said.

Among them are "sustainability of the current operations, affordability of the fares and the ability to safely and efficiently accommodate the region's transportation growth," she said.

"For many parts of the Puget Sound region, the ferries are a lifeline for their economies," Rolfes said.

State Sen. Phil Rockefeller echoed Rolfes' sentiments on the issues faced by all ferry communities.

"Ferries are a mainstay to every one of these communities," he said. "Assuring reliable and affordable service is the key issue we all share."

SEE SUMMIT, PAGE A8

SUMMIT

CONTINUED FROM A1

By bringing the groups together, Rolfes said her hope is that all involved will begin working toward solutions instead of pointing fingers at each other.

"It's always ideal for all parties who need dependable ferry service to work toward common goals instead of competing with one another," Rockefeller said. "Part of this initial meeting is to define what those common goals are. The quicker we can define our goals, the sooner we can work as a united group to improve WSF's

performance, and the state's financial commitment."

Although the meeting is one of the first of its kind, it is not an attempt to find solutions, Rolfes said.

"It is a first step toward bringing together local leaders from around the region to learn about the issues facing the ferry system and for them to begin to take steps to have a greater role in the outcomes. New ideas and possible solutions will ideally come forward, along with suggestions for how to move them productively along," she said. "Heretofore, the discussion about ferries has been mostly happening in Olympia, and it's time to move those discussions out of Olympia."

That being said, Rolfes emphasized that "this is not a one-shot attempt" at addressing the ferry issues.

"Follow-up efforts should be identified by the participants and

may be different in their scope or more targeted in their goals," she said.

"If we can achieve consensus among all the parties it would be a win-win situation," Appleton said. "I am not sure that will happen but there will be a better understanding of the problems and what it will take to solve them."

If the meeting lives up to expectations, Appleton said she believes there could be another meeting, but it all depends on what happens on Dec. 7.

Rockefeller said he doesn't believe the answers will be found during the course of this initial meeting, but he has hope for a long-term solution.

"The findings at this meeting will determine subsequent action and it is my hope that local participants from all ferry-reliant areas will find it worth the time and effort to continue working toward a joint goal," he said.