

CLEAR



STEVE ZUGSCHWERDT | KITSAP SUN



With holiday music by the Bremerton High School marching band, Bremerton Mayor Cary Bozeman and U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks presided over the inaugural lighting of the Bremerton Christmas tree Friday night in the courtyard of Building 50, near the downtown ferry terminal.

Ferries: Complex Ailments, No Easy Answers

The system will have to find a way to become self-sustaining with little help from state lawmakers, attendees of a Friday summit in Bremerton learned.

By ED FRIEDRICH
EFRIEDRICH@KITSAPSUN.COM

BREMERTON
Question: What is Washington State Ferries' favorite route?

Answer: Not mine.

If ferry riders have anything in common, they all think their route is getting the short end of the stick. Leaders from disparate ferry communities, which compete for limited ferry resources, tried to put those differences aside Friday and focus on common needs.

The Puget Sound Leadership Ferry Summit, a daylong brainstorming session at the Norm Dicks Government Center, generated myriad ideas. It also generated the sobering fact that there will be no additional state money to realize those ideas.

Panelist Judy Clibborn, chairwoman of the House Transportation Committee and admitted bearer of bad news, told an audience of about 140 that there is no transportation budget surplus.

Federal dollars are gone. Gas-tax revenues have leveled off because people are driving less and in more fuel-efficient cars. Money coming in is committed to specific highway

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projects for the next 16 years.

If that money was shifted to the ferries, constituents would flip — and they know who their lawmakers are.

"You will not be getting it from the gas tax because those projects are all out the door and people know where they are," said Clibborn, D-Mercer Island.

The group, with the help of a ferry finance study that's due at the end of 2008, needs to discover a new way to permanently replace motor vehicle excise revenues that the ferry system lost in November 1999. And fare increases are out. They've already shot up 80 percent since 2000, and everyone present agreed enough is enough.

"They've got to come up with a more credible and stable way of funding the ferry system instead of on an ad hoc two-year basis," U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, said of state government.

Service cuts appear to be off

the board, too, Clibborn said, "but we might deliver that service in different ways."

What solutions does that leave? Nothing obvious.

That's why this group of government leaders and ferry users from around the region met Friday — to milk their combined creativity. And there were a few unique ideas.

Bremerton Mayor Cary Bozeman proposed setting up a taxing district made up of the Puget Sound community to address common goals like transportation, the environment and water quality.

It would take courage because of the public's anti-tax disposition, Bozeman said, "but we need to start exploring that option right away."

Sen. Joe McDermott's group suggested reversing the way the ferry system operates today. Fares go toward running the boats and the leftover helps with capital costs, which have barely been enough maintain the existing system. Why not use fares to repair

and build boats and terminals and let the Legislature find a permanent revenue stream to cover operating costs?

The ferry system could get a big financial boost just by bringing back riders it's lost, said Gary Dawson of the Fauntleroy ferry advisory committee. In 1999, Washington State Ferries carried a record 23.9 million people. After seven years of hefty fare hikes, that number dipped by nearly 3 million.

It costs a drive-on commuter \$4,500 per year to take the ferry and the walk-on passenger more than \$1,000 a year, said Martha Burke of Bainbridge Island, chairwoman of the ferry advisory executive committee.

"Those with working-wage jobs can no longer afford to ride," she said. "... The vitality of all of our communities depends on the health of our ferry system. We don't need all the bells and whistles but regular, on-time service with fares we can afford."