

OPINION

EDITORIAL

Pulling Together to Face the State's Ferry Problems

There's no silver bullet — and don't expect the cavalry to ride over the hill to your rescue.

That is, no pot of gold will be showering down on Washington State Ferries, solving funding problems and saving riders from never-ending fare increases.

To the 140 attendees at Friday's Puget Sound Leadership Ferry Summit in Bremerton, that information wasn't surprising, and it wasn't pleasant. But laying it out plainly served a valuable purpose.

"I always kind of figured somebody else was going to solve it," said Bremerton Mayor Cary Bozeman, probably echoing the thoughts of many others attending the conference.

Bozeman was talking about the ferry funding fiasco that began in 1999, when voters approved Initiative 695 to kill the — pricey to motorists and profitable to the state — motor vehicle excise tax. After I-695 was ruled unconstitutional, politically motivated legislators voted to eliminate the MVET, which had provided 70 percent of the ferry system's operating budget — and didn't replace that funding.

Since 2000, ferry tickets have escalated more than 70 percent via unchecked, hand-to-mouth fare hikes used by the autonomous Transportation Commission as an annual quick fix for Washington State Ferries' budget problems. Predictably, ferry ridership has dropped off; nearly 3 million fewer people rode the ferries in 2006 than in 1999.

And each year, the Legislature as a whole has shown no interest either in providing more ferry operating funds, or in slowing runaway fare increases.

But last session was different. House Bill 2358, prime-sponsored by Rep. Christine Rolfe, D-Bainbridge Island, and strongly supported by Gov. Chris Gregoire, mandated a fare freeze for at least two years or until a comprehensive study of ferry finances, operations and pricing policy is complete.

The freeze-and-study requirement will provide long-needed relief to ferry riders. More significantly, it should compel the state to develop reasonable and orderly means of setting ferry fares and coming up with a realistic and sustainable financial and operating plan.

That also was the main issue at Friday's conference, an ad hoc event organized by the Kitsap Regional Coordinating Council that brought together representatives of local governments in the region, the state, private ferry operators, transportation agencies and others.

What resulted was a comprehensive and candid — occasionally blunt — discussion of facts and perspectives about ferry issues.

In particular, the state's plan to have fares cover 90 percent and more of operating costs was called "unacceptable" and "not attainable." But also, Rep. Judy Clibborn, chair of the House Transportation Committee, made it plain that no gas tax money will be available, and that ferry officials and riders should plan on having a "leaner, more flexible" ferry system.

As the session ended, no solutions had been produced. But there was no expectation there would be.

Instead, the summit was planned as an unprecedented convening of all major stakeholders in the ferry system, and as a day to face hard realities and start recognizing them as problems that — somehow — can be solved. Last Friday, they made a good beginning of it.