



PIERCE COUNTY WATERBORNE TRANSPORTATION STUDY

ADVISORY GROUP MEETING: JULY 1, 2015 MEETING SUMMARY

ATTENDANCE:

Paul Loveless, Town of Steilacoom

Michael Hodgins, BERK

Dave Jacobsen, Anderson Island Citizens'
Advisory Board Ferry Liaison

Melanie Mayock, BERK

Kendel Lyman, Anderson Island Volunteer Patrol

Deb Wallace, Pierce County Public Works and
Utilities

Susan Greer, Steilacoom School District

Valerie Thorsen, Public County Public Works and
Utilities

Vivien Savath, BERK

Welcome and Introduction

Michael walked through the meeting agenda and the rest of the Study process and timeline. Today's meeting we'll spend time talking about prioritization and ranking for short-term actions. Our next steps are to work on a six-year implementation schedule. The July 10th AICAB meeting will start the public process on implementation steps (as opposed to the broader policy discussion that has been the focus so far). At the AICAB meeting we'll share additional detail and get feedback, and will have enough background for people who haven't participated. On July 28th the draft recommendations go to County Council.

Review Feedback on Emerging Recommendations

Michael described feedback on draft recommendations. The meeting packet has a summary of public comment, including the last public meeting. There was general support for a lot of the recommendations, and some "it depends" comments – the devil is in the details. Each action will have to go through a process on its own before the County Council weighs in. Some folks are not convinced we need reservations. It's not a near-term action, but we want to have the capability to do that in a new system. After the near-term actions, that is likely to be the next operational strategy that might make sense in the longer-term period. For now we just want the capability to go in that direction. Also, oversize vehicle pricing is a hot issue for some people.

AG Member: There's no tar and feather yet [people are not really upset yet].

Deb: Is that because they agree, or they aren't engaged?

AG Member: I concur – it's quiet. All too often you get the feedback when the final stuff comes out.

Michael: At the AICAB meeting we'll pivot from high level policy recommendations to specific actions and a preliminary timeline. We'll use the meeting to see what kind of opposition/reaction may be out there. These are the implications of these higher-level policy things.

AG Member: At the AICAB meeting will we talk about 2016-17 fares – a 3% increase?

Deb: Yes, we will.

AG Member: That will add to the mix. Haven't talked about general fare increases yet.

Deb: There will be an opportunity to talk about specific changes for service.

Michael: We're trying to change the near-term actions into a conceptual road map. Here's a sequence, implications on funding, fares – not just this year, but a look ahead.

Final Draft Recommendations

Michael: It's a challenge to talk about a fare increase, because we're talking about a fare revenue requirement [see packet page 4]. Most of the recommendations are about maintaining a solid and diverse ridership base. A lot of recommendations are to enhance the County's ability to grow its ridership, get people to ride more frequently, etc. Change the balance of who's paying for what – infrequent/frequent riders. Add more service to make it more convenient. The revenue target is hard to meet if there are fewer trips to spread costs over. Ideally we want new riders to make up revenue needs, as opposed to only fare increases providing the funds. The alternative is not pretty - if there's a declining rider base it's hard to maintain service.

Deb: There are several things at play: 1) we need additional farebox recovery; 2) the recommendations cost money; 3) overall inflation. Adding more service will cost money. What we've planned for fares is 3% fare increase to pay for inflation expenses.

Michael: But if we don't do things to keep and grow ridership, the County may have to increase fares more than inflation to keep overall revenue. We're trying to avoid drops in ridership and avoid really high fares or really low service.

AG Member: What we're looking at now is not much growth and a lot of transition. Some people can't adjust to island life and move. Didn't some of those studies show that there isn't that much growth forecast on the island? We have to balance that.

Michael: The constraint is not likely to be the number of lots that are built on; the constraint is the demographics of who's living on the island. We could have a 10% growth in housing units but if they are mostly retirees, that growth won't help the number of trips.

AG Member: Some people say retirees don't contribute to ferry revenue, but we have a different kind of retirees – this is my third trip to the mainland this week.

Michael: It's discretionary vs non-discretionary trips. As a retiree you have some discretion that a worker doesn't. There's a wide range among folks with discretionary trips and how much they use the service. It's not retirees vs workers, there's a whole spectrum among both groups.

AG Member: What you have to balance is how to make it better for people who have to go off the island more frequently. An earlier morning run – there costs are associated with it, but if we got a whole bunch of people who would do that rather than just a few... Do you have to experiment and see what happens?

Michael: We have to try it and see how the world reacts. We've heard stories of folks who can't make it work anymore. For those folks, this might make it easier for them to stay on the island. The more trips, the easier it is on everyone, because you spread the trips over a bigger base. You get to a place with enough service that it supports enough families and lifestyles – it's reasonably convenient to live on the island, but not excessively so. We can't put tons of service out there. In the summer, the 2-boat schedule is about getting people to use their place more frequently. Those are trips that could conceivably start to happen. Weekdays is about island residents. If it doesn't work out that way, we can circle back, but this is a way to put more foundation under the ridership.

AG Member: Everyone goes off island for shopping. A lot of people have lots of trips for medical appointments. I really like the 2-boat service – I like that suggestion very much – it relieves us from having to run ferry lines, relieves congestion. It will relieve that congestion – that’s when you get the fights.

Michael: That’s when people want to travel – we don’t know how many more trips are out there. Folks who are visiting or going off island to see family – can’t do it. A lot of recommendations are around shoring up the ridership base and get it growing. The idea is to do something now before we get downstream and demographics on the island change further. That’s the key organizing principle for a lot of these near-term actions.

AG Member: It’s very expensive to live on the island, period. The land taxes, food, fuel – anything that comes by boat – paying more for a lot of things.

Michael: It’s expensive in time too. Anything we can do to help mitigate the cost inflation and to make it marginally more convenient – more windows in which to travel, etc.

AG Member: I appreciate the approach of trying it, and backing out if doesn’t worked. We did that with Thursday evening service - a lot of people were skeptical, and it worked.

Deb: I agree – there can be value in putting the title “pilot” on it, but not for the early morning service, since we’re trying to get people to move here. But the summer weekend could be called pilot. My concern is – how do we pay for it in the short-term? There’s no money in the road fund to take more. The recommendations are wonderful, but how do you pay for it? Islanders may have to advocate with the County Council for more money – that’s a tough one when they don’t have money for other things.

Michael: Part of the challenge we need to articulate is that this is like insurance – it may cost more in the short-run, but if it does stabilize ridership, it’s a long-term benefit to the system. There’s risk in not trying these things.

AG Member: Finding that balance of the most bang for the buck is partly the schedules – that’s going to hit all the groups. Everyone will think – what does this mean to me? You have to look at the overall picture, which is hard for some people to do.

Michael: It’s important to frame these recommendations as not one-off ideas, but a package to deal with the underlying risk of losing ridership. We’ve seen the trend in the last decade. What can we do to shore this up?

[Packet page 5,6] Broadening the funding base is important (concessions, advertising, chartering, etc.) – it helps support the operating budget. In the longer term, we should look at a ferry district to broaden the funding base. If ridership isn’t growing, we have other ways to provide funding, because we know the County road fund is constrained. Fare policies are around who’s paying what. The fare revenue target is what it is – the question is how you spread those costs – e.g. reward frequent users, etc.

Michael reviewed the short- and long-term recommendations (packet page 7).

Deb: What about encouraging carpool or Uber options in addition to remote parking?

Michael: That should be on there. Not sure if the companies are operating are in Pierce County.

Deb: There is car share in downtown Tacoma. With Uber, you can go anywhere.

AG Member: In the school district we have a car we leave on the island.

Michael: If there were on-island Uber drivers...

AG Member: If we could use some of the key parking spaces that are controlled by the state ... that's the big disadvantage of walk-ons.

Deb: That's the thing with remote parking –how might people get there. Even tourism potential.

AG Member: It's not unheard of for walk-ins to get off on the island and say, "where's the bus?"

AG Member: People from other parts of the state love Anderson Island, but it's hard to get to. Maybe the teenagers could make some money driving people around.

Deb: We could put something in about cultivating tourism on the island.

Vivien: We talked at the public meeting about marketing for the counter-flow, to generate ridership in low-demand periods.

Deb: The camera club from Olympia wants to go to Anderson Island.

Michael: Does AICAB have a tourism element?

AG Member: Not really. We have a park district – a lot of open space under park district responsibility. They might be a logical lead.

Michael: Does Pierce County have a tourism board?

Deb: Yes.

Michael: There's some institutional capacity for tourism.

Deb: The County would definitely want to participate, no question.

Dave: Pierce Transit had offered us a vehicle if we could provide a driver.

Michael reviewed the funding and other recommendations [packet page 8].

Michael: We'll email the form out to everyone and ask for responses by Monday (well before the July 10 AICAB meeting).

AG Member: I thought Ketron already had the schedule they wanted.

Deb: It's what they want, but they would like an additional run. That will get the most opposition.

Michael: It's a policy decision. It's one or two days with extra flexibility.

AG Member: It's a big inconvenience, especially in the summer – we have people left behind on Anderson for 2 cars on Ketron.

AG Member: There's a lot of history to it.

Michael: It's a tough one – such an imbalance on market size.

Michael reviewed more recommendations.

AG Member: People in line ask me if there will be two-boat service. They've gotten used to having two-boat service when needed.

Michael: Under our recommendation, you could count on it.

Public Comment

No members of the public attended to provide public comment.

Recap and Next Steps

Michael reviewed the next steps – page 19 of the packet.

Adjourn