

MEETING SUMMARY
SAN JUAN ISLANDS VRS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MEETING
SAN JUAN ISLAND YACHT CLUB, FRIDAY HARBOR, WA
Wednesday, April 30, 2014 11:30 a.m. – 2:10 p.m.

Note: This meeting summary represents notes from the Washington State Department of Transportation Ferries Division (WSF) Partnership Group Meeting, and is not a formal transcript or minutes. It is provided as a record for the staff, group members and public in attendance, and other interested parties.

Welcome

George Capacci, Interim Assistant Secretary WSDOT Ferries Division

George welcomed the group and thanked them for their ongoing participation. He introduced Fauna Larkin of BERK & Associates, who will be facilitating future meetings in place of Michael Hodgins.

George took a moment to acknowledge the terrible loss suffered by partnership member Susan Young, whose husband recently passed away; our thoughts and prayers are with Susan during this difficult time.

Meeting Overview

Fauna Larkin, BERK & Associates

Fauna went over the agenda and handouts, which were revised to include the Anacortes Operating Plan based on feedback from the group.

Budget Update

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian went over the current budget situation. The Legislature rejected the recent budget package, which would have provided operating funds to ensure the reservations system works well, including additional staff at the terminals and in customer service, a reservations Manager, an improved phone system to handle customer calls, etc. The money to cover these items through the current biennium has been found in areas where other WSF departments are running under budget, so the system will still be able to go live on December 28 as planned. However, Legislative approval of the 2015-2017 budget package is critical to ensure that the reservations program moves forward. Brian asked for the group's help in communicating that need to their Representatives. The new budget request will include an educational piece to help show Legislators the critical need for the success of the reservations system.

Questions & Comments

1. (Gordon Jonasson) If you don't get the budget approval for 2015-2017 would you still be able to implement the system?
It would be very difficult to implement reservations without that funding package.
2. (Jamie Stephens) Are you sure you should be committing capital if you don't know that the funding is locked in?
We hear your concern; we have invested significantly in the reservations system already. It is a project that we really need to support and demonstrate success. The things we are doing will benefit our customers even aside from the ability to reserve a space: the new tollbooth at Orcas, more cameras, the mobile website, wireless access points. These are things that people have been wanting for a long time, that support current operations and communications at the terminals. It is good that we are moving forward with the capital piece; we won't lose those benefits.
3. (Bill Pike) For the 2015-2017 biennium, when will the budget be approved?
*The Legislative session runs from January through April in 2015.
So the work will be next winter.
Yes, by then we will have rolled out the communications plan through the summer and fall, and have already gone live with reservations in the islands. We are currently preparing the budget request at WSF, then it goes to the Office of Financial Management (OFM) and the Governor's office, then to the Legislature in January.*
4. (John MacLeod) The worst thing you could do now is stop because of the uncertainty. If they don't approve the funds and you have to stop taking reservations next year there will be a huge response from this community I can tell you. You should keep moving forward.
5. (Pat McKay) Is the operational portion of this investment going to make it so it's revenue neutral or will the farebox recovery be in worse shape, which is what the Legislature is already complaining about?
That's a good question. There is no formal economic study to help us forecast the effects of the reservations system on farebox recovery. However, the indications are that there will be positive benefits such as increased ridership. That is what we have seen at Port Townsend / Coupeville.
6. (John Whetten) What is the ballpark figure for the operational cost?
For this biennium it is close to one million dollars, but that includes the cost of changing out the phone system with an improved one, which is about half of that.

Anacortes Operating Plan

Fauna Larkin, BERK & Associates

Fauna went over the Anacortes Operating Assumptions handout.

Questions & Comments

1. (John Brantigan) You have not identified the problems, so you can't make the solutions. The throughput at the booths takes too long, so you cannot load two boats. It's over a minute or longer for commercial reservations. Comingling reserved vehicles with others is a nightmare; people will never be able to get to the booths. It will be a failure.
2. (John MacLeod) Up until now we've been saying that we don't want people showing up more than 30 minutes early; if you're now saying 90 minutes that's counterproductive.
What we had looked at is the Phase 1 arrival window, and we saw that people arrive on average 5 to 90 minutes prior to their sailings. With the transaction time at the tollbooth we need people to arrive at least 30 minutes ahead or we will not be able to process them through the booths in time. We have the room to stage them if they arrive up to 90 minutes ahead; any more than that and staging them interferes with earlier sailings. That's how we landed on the 30-90 minute window.
3. (Bill Pike) Conceptually, yes, I would feel that reservations are a success if I could arrive 30 minutes ahead and be assured of getting on the boat. However, I was under the impression that this group endorses the idea of reserving the entire boat with the exception of those spots held for emergencies. We want to discourage anyone from showing up without a reservation; if you allow drive-ups there will be logjams at the terminals no matter how many booths are open. I thought we were going to virtually 100% reservations?
We agree, and we are still there. We will have 95% reservations during busy times, but there will always be drive-ups. We hope to spread that demand with this system.
4. (Clark Johnson) Using the word standby is asking for problems. The way to make this system work is to have text signs to inform people before they turn left on the spur whether or not they would have a chance of getting through the booths. You nixed that at the last meeting; that's a huge problem. I looked at the loading patterns for the summer, and there is only one time during the day when more than one boat is being loaded. With an operating system that is fully working it should be true that only 144 cars are showing up at a time. Good job on this traffic staging simulation, but I am distressed that you did not incorporate the expected benefits of the system. The whole point is we don't expect those 220 cars to be showing up.
We are using the worst case scenario without the expected spreading out that will occur with the reservations system in place. We wanted to see the impact at the tollbooth that will happen during rollout before the expected success of spreading demand kicks in. We can reduce staff at Anacortes once the improvement starts, but need to be prepared at the beginning.
These are the best materials you have ever given us.

5. (Jamie Stephens) What are you going to do about the chat time and conversations that go on at the booths?
If you look at page 3 of the packet, we show the average processing times, which accounts for those conversations. We have seen big improvements on the 63 seconds, and we have plans to keep improving that processing time.
6. (John Brantigan) One way to decrease that time is giving reservation holders a scannable boarding pass and funneling them into a special lane; don't make them wait in line behind drive-ups.
That is a great idea, and we will look at that being a part of the new ticketing system we will get in about 5 years. That new system will not be part of this rollout, so we will have to wait for that technology since our current ticketing system does not allow for that.
7. (Jim Corenman) What happened to the variable message sign idea in Anacortes?
The cost for that is almost a half million dollars, and space would only allow for limited information. We did not see it as a wise use of funds.
If the boats are full, you don't want people to turn left. How can you get that message to them? What about a little sign near the intersection in town? If I'm not going to get on a boat, I wouldn't want to be stuck in that line; how can you get people that message in Anacortes?
There is a sign limitation in Anacortes; we already checked that. The communications push that we have planned will help educate people. Once people know reservations exist, the information is there for them online.
8. (Ken Burtness) We also had talked about a kiosk in Anacortes; is there some simple way to let people know as they drive into town, perhaps a flashing sign directing them to the kiosk?
We are still assessing the kiosk idea from a cost standpoint.
9. (Howie Rosenfeld) When we began this process we put an effort into trying to make the locals feel comfortable that if they have last minute travel needs they will be able to get off the island. For the kiosk in Anacortes, there is an opportunity for a public/private partnership. Any business in town would love the traffic that would bring.
We have thought about doing a pilot on that to see if the benefit is worth the cost.
10. (Carol Anderson) I remember when we used to be able to arrive with coupons and buzz through the kiosk that was just for us; it was so easy. If we could do that with reservations that would be great. About the transponder things by Sharpes Corner: I have checked them and they are usually behind, like still being on the fall schedule.
Part of the capital piece will be upgrading that system; we are working with WSDOT Northwest Region to have messages on I-5 as you approach Highway 20 as well. We are also looking at putting up static signs along the route that tell people reservations are recommended.

11. (John MacLeod) Has the impact of the reservations system been coordinated with those who create the schedule? If we can only accommodate staging for one sailing at a time the schedule will need to change.
We can accommodate the current volume of traffic if that fourth booth is open.
12. (Deborah Hopkins) The Anacortes Chamber is excited about the signage and kiosk ideas helping to keep business in their community. They would be willing to help you in any way you need.
13. (Bill Pike) To John's comment about a dedicated lane, that is an excellent idea. If we could dedicate one booth so we can just shoot right through and scan a reservation card that would be great; you may need variable signs on the booths. Another point, I had a thought that you could make use of the DOT weigh station on I-5. There could be signage there suggesting they pull in to make their reservation. It seems like there's plenty of room there, it would give people the option to spend their time in Anacortes before sailing, it gets people off the road, and it's cheap.
14. (Gordon Jonasson) Not everyone is hyper into technology, keep that in mind.
15. (David Dubbell) For your marketing and publicity, why not use the private sector? Give them a cut of the ticket and put them to work; it doesn't always have to be done by the state.
16. (Clark Johnson) Bill, that is a great idea. To add to that, instead of thinking about a fourth tollbooth, which you only need during high volume times, what you need to do is get that line shorter, intercede those who don't need to be there. Why not put an agent at the top of the road to get them out of line. Communicate and you won't need that fourth booth.

Fauna went over the low-volume scenario handout.

17. (Margot Shaw) If this very-early person doesn't want to go on that sailing, where do they go?
We cannot stage for multiple sailings, so they can choose to turn around and come back later, or they can go on the earlier sailing.
18. (Carol Anderson) Is there a possibility of eliminating the tag shack? That's the logjam; why not have the tollbooth person give you your lane assignment?
That is ideal and will go hand-in-hand with the new ticketing system. We want to get there.
19. (John Brantigan) You're making it way too complicated, mixing cars with and without reservations. Just give them a reservation when they go through the booth. Don't cut off reservations 3 hours early, it should be continuous. Also, reserve 105% of the boat, not 100%.
We are technically giving them a reservation, we are just calling them "entitled." As for the 105%, we cannot do that due to the need to leave space for emergencies. The 3 hour cutoff comes from conversations with our terminal staff; they need time to stage and communicate to drive-ups the likelihood of

- getting on a sailing. They need a 3 hour window to plan appropriately. We are pushing back and hope to get that down to 2 hours, but right now we stand at 3 hours.*
20. (John MacLeod) I don't understand the problem you're trying to solve.
We're trying to be consistent so that the business rules are the same for Friday Harbor and Anacortes. We don't have the same tools at each location; the staff need the ability to communicate the likelihood of being able to make a sailing.
21. (Bill Pike) That does encourage drive-ups, particularly in the islands. If they decide to travel less than 3 hours before a sailing they can't make a reservation, the only way to travel is to be a drive-up—exactly what you don't want.
That is the challenge with the balance we are trying to achieve.
22. (Ken Burtness) Regarding the 3 hour rule, I would like to see that go down. If I'm on the mainland running around all day, I'm often not sure 3 hours ahead of time which boat I want.
We agree; we will continue to work with our staff on this issue. 90 minutes seems like more of an ideal cutoff; we will keep working on it.
23. (Carol Anderson) You need to think about the difference between Anacortes and Friday Harbor because it's a whole different world going the other way; a different can of worms.
We're glad you brought that up. Keep that in mind as we discuss consistency of business rules vs. accommodating different needs at different terminals. Will a customer understand that there are different rules going eastbound vs. westbound, or is that too confusing? At what point is consistency more important than flexibility; something for you to think about.
24. (Bill Pike) It sounds to me that if you've gotten to your cutoff point, a person at each terminal should have a list of the available space.
That is mechanized for Anacortes; the system knows that and it will be reported online as well. It is not true for the islands, and therein lies the challenge.
25. (John MacLeod) I feel that you are overemphasizing the importance of keeping it the same everywhere. People will go online and try to make a reservation and if they can't, they can't. Because of the problems in the islands you're cutting people off in Anacortes just to avoid confusion. You're better off tailoring each terminal; people won't remember the rules.
The system will be flexible enough that we can change the cutoff time; we want to make it work for everyone.

Fauna went over the high-volume scenario hand-out.

26. (Margot Shaw) Is this the worst-case scenario?
No, this represents most overloaded summer sailings, but there are holiday weekends when it is even crazier.
What does the tollbooth person say to the drive-ups on how to make a reservation if they can't do it at the booth?

They will be able to do it at the booth; they would give them a reservation on the next available sailing and then send them off to eat or shop and return at the proper arrival window.

Couldn't they just get out of their car and walk in to do it?

No, we will not be giving reservations in the passenger area of the terminal; they would do it at the tollbooth.

27. (Clark Johnson) This is a dedicated boat to Friday Harbor; what is the case for a multiple destination sailing?

We will continue to use the current tagging process to keep track.

I can imagine a situation where that won't work; let's talk later.

28. (Pat McKay) If you're asking people to turn out, they're going to sit there and discuss it; that will increase the processing time.

That is a concern that we are aware of.

When you're figuring the size of the boats, what size vehicle are you using to figure out the capacity?

We currently use 18', but we will be using a new laser-measuring tool which will help us understand what the actual vehicle sizes are.

29. (Jamie Stephens) Can you review how you define low or high volume? It seems like during low volume you don't get dinged by making a change and at high volume you get charged.

There is no set definition of low or high, the difference is at low volume you can travel on a different sailing because there's room. At high volume there is no room, so a person has to make a new reservation, then leave and come back.

That would assess a no-show fee on their originally reserved sailing.

I have an issue with that; you're penalizing people for being responsible.

If you drove up to the booth to make the change you would be charged the fee, but if you called to change your reservation you would not be charged; you are allowed one change as long as it is 3 hours prior to your reserved sailing. The reason for this is to provide incentive for people to call ahead to make the change; the challenge is balancing incentive to let us know with not penalizing people for things they have no control over.

30. (John Brantigan) It takes 90 minutes to drive from Seattle to Anacortes, so the cutoff should be 90 minutes.

31. (Carol Anderson) Will you be charged a no-show fee if you can't get on to the last boat of the day?

Yes, as of now we would charge a fee.

32. (Ken Burtness) To address Clark's concern about multiple stops, what will you do about the Lopez overloads? Under reservations Friday Harbor overloads will be able to get on but not Lopez?

We will look into that.

Summary and Next Steps

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian noted that the group was not able to get all the way through the agenda, so at the next meeting the agenda will include service disruptions, operations in the islands, tiered release of space, the WAC change and the communications plan.

Public Comments

1. It looks like you're getting pretty far down the road and really getting into the weeds. Thank you for serving on this group and getting reservations going so I can come up here in the summertime; I appreciate that very much.

Conclusion

Brian thanked everybody for coming, and asked the group to hold both May 28 and June 17 for the next two meetings. Meeting was adjourned.

Group Members

Present	Name of Group Member	Representing
	Adrienne Adams	Lopez Island
	Mike Aley	Orcas Island
X	Carol Anderson	San Juan Island
	Kathy Booth	Lopez Island
X	John Brantigan	Shaw Island
X	Ken Burtness	Lopez Island
	Cass Clark	Lopez Island
X	Jim Corenman	San Juan Island
X	David Dubbell	San Juan Island
	Lance Evans	Orcas Island
	Tony Ghazel	Orcas Island
	Wally Gudgell	Orcas Island
	John Hess	San Juan Island
X	Deborah Hopkins	San Juan Island
X	Clark Johnson	Lopez Island
X	Gordon Jonasson	Lopez Island
	Mark Lione	Anacortes
X	John MacLeod	Orcas Island
X	Pat McKay	San Juan Island
X	Bill Pike	Mount Vernon
	John Poletti	Orcas Island
X	Howie Rosenfeld	San Juan Island

X	Margot Shaw	Orcas Island
X	Jamie Stephens	Lopez Island
	Mike Stolmeier	Orcas Island
	Terresa Sundstrom	San Juan Island
	Sally Thomsen	San Juan Island
X	Larry Vandermay	Orcas Island
X	John Whetten	Lopez Island
	Susan Young	Lopez Island
X	Beverly Zapalac	Lopez Island

Project Team

- George Capacci, WSF Deputy Chief of Construction & Operations
- Marta Coursey, WSF Director of Communications
- Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations
- Trevor Sharp, Anacortes Reservations Planning Manager
- Fauna Larkin, BERK & Associates
- Rachel Waitt, WSF Communications
- Carrie Oberg, WSF Communications