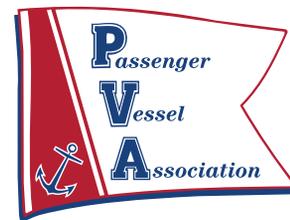


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Washington State Ferries Celebrate 60 Years of Service

Keith Anderson was doing aerial photography work for WSDOT's Visual Engineering Resource Group when he captured this image of the Washington State Ferry MV Wenatchee heading toward Colman Dock in Seattle. Photo courtesy of WSDOT.

The central fact of life for the Washington State Ferries (WSF) is the confluence of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, separating Washington state from Vancouver Island in Canada, and Puget Sound, a fjord running a hundred miles from the capital in Olympia on the south to the San Juan Islands and Canada on the north.

Puget Sound provides a complicated mix of customers and service needs. The San Juan Islands are a beautiful archipelago of rural islands and rely heavily on the tourism industry. Weekend travelers

and vacationers frequent Whidbey Island, the historic community of Port Townsend and the Olympic Peninsula. Farther south, the central Puget Sound routes serve many commuters who live in Kitsap County and on Vashon Island but work in Seattle and King County. As a result, every route in the WSF system is different and has unique ridership characteristics and customer needs.

WSF serves more than 22 million people each year on nine different routes. The system operates 22 vessels and 20 terminals throughout the

Puget Sound area.

WSF is celebrating 60 years of service this year. As with all things ferries, the birth of the state ferry system was complicated and controversial. Labor concerns played a big part in getting the state involved in the ferry business. In the late 1940s, ferry workers' unions succeeded in getting higher wages at Puget Sound Navigation, also called Black Ball, the largest provider of service on the Sound. The company then asked the Washington State Highway Department for a 30 percent fare increase to make ends meet. The state

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approved only a 10 percent increase, and on March 1, 1948, the ferry company tied up its vessels, bringing much of the cross-Sound service to a halt.

State officials realized that some kind of permanent plan was needed to ensure reliable ferry service on Puget Sound, and for \$5 million, the state of Washington purchased the system. Washington State Ferries was born in 1951, now completing its sixth decade as a major part of the state's transportation system.

Over the years, WSF struggled to keep up with the explosive growth of Puget Sound's population. The growth was accommodated by bringing new and larger boats into service. In the 1950s the 87-car Evergreen State Class entered in the fleet. The 1960s brought the 144-car Super Class; 1970s the 188-car Jumbo Class; and in the early 1980s the 90-car Issaquah Class, later upgraded to 124-car capacity. The largest of the fleet, the 202-car Jumbo Mark II Class, was added in the 1990s.

However, in 1999 the ferry system was hit hard when its major source of operating and capital funding subsidy, the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET), was taken away. The MVET was based on a percentage of a car's value. It was not unusual for Washington residents to pay up to \$200 to \$300 per year for license tabs. A voter initiative proposed to reduce that to a simple and significantly lower fee of \$30. Not surprisingly, the initiative passed overwhelmingly and while it was soon found unconstitutional by the state Supreme Court, the Legislature corrected the constitutional flaws and passed the initiative, into law in 2000. This state subsidy lost eleven years ago has not been replaced.

While WSF was not a target of the initiative it sure felt the impact. The



Chetzemoka arrives in Port Townsend, WA. Photo courtesy WSDOT.

ferry system lost 25 percent of its operating budget and 75 percent of its dedicated capital budget. The loss of the MVET in some ways ended the "heyday" of the ferry system. During the MVET years, the ferry system added its largest vessels, kept fares extremely low and gained ridership. It is no coincidence that the highest ridership for WSF, more than 26 million passengers, came in 1999.

The turn of the century seemed like a turning of the page for WSF – and not in a good way. In response to the loss of the MVET, the ferry system raised fares substantially over the next few years and service was reduced. As a result, ferry ridership began a slow but steady decline. The capital program was cut back. No new boats were built for more than a decade and the fleet began to show its advancing age.

The wake-up call that got the attention of customers, legislators and stakeholders to the plight of WSF was when the Secretary of Transportation, Paula Hammond, pulled the 80-year-old Steel Electric

Class vessels from service for safety reasons over the Thanksgiving holiday in 2007. From that moment forward, the ferry system has been about reform, change and improvement.

While many challenges remain, sustainable funding being the greatest, the last few years have shown a resurgence of the ferry system. Operating and capital costs have been reduced – saving more than \$30 million per year. Labor has contributed by agreeing to lower compensation thereby saving the system approximately \$10 million per year. WSF is now bringing new boats into service with the 64-car Kwa-di Tabil Class; replacing the retired Steel Electrics. The legislature has also funded a 144-car ferry to begin the process of replacing the Evergreen State Class which is nearing the end of its 60-year life cycle.

With farebox revenues covering 70 percent of operating costs and 40 percent of all costs, the system's current profile is stable. Its reliability is high at more than 99 percent, as is its on-time performance at more than

96 percent. The system has its eye sharply focused on the core mission which is to move customers safely and reliably, with exceptional customer service, across the waters of Puget Sound.

It's tomorrow that keeps intruding. To keep the average age of the fleet steady, WSF needs to continue to build new boats to replace the Evergreen State Class and soon after that the Super Class. With labor and fuel consuming 80 percent of the operating budget, the system has little room to make further reductions. The capital set aside provided by the MVET is gone, and each new budget

is a struggle with an array of important transportation priorities.

At the same time WSF welcomed its 60th year, Gov. Chris Gregoire announced the formation of a task force, charged with developing a comprehensive transportation revenue package to be considered by the 2012 Legislature. The governor was clear that the financial needs of the ferry system must be addressed as part of the funding package.

At 60, Washington State Ferries remains the state's most popular tourist attraction. At the same time, it is also a vital marine highway, transporting millions of peo-

ple each year to work and leisure. Its safety record is among the best in the world for both its employees and customers. So while it has plenty to build on, it is going to require a lot of work and effort – by a lot of people – to get WSF through another 60 years. ■

About the Author

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