

Public Works Committee June 4, 2013 Meeting Recap

In attendance: Chairwoman Brenner, Mann, Kremen
Weimer briefly

Funding Clarification

Director of Public Works Frank Abart and County Board Administration Board (CRAB) member Jeff Monsen reported that use of the Motor Vehicle Fuel Tax (MVFT) attributable to the county ferry is really up to the County Council, since it can always be offset by a change in the split of the current 55/45 coverage of costs. We receive the money from the state because we have a ferry, but it can be used as the county sees fit. Councilman Mann indicated "Frank is doing it right. The 55/45 split is the real debate." Councilman Kremen questioned where the funds should best be applied noting that Skagit County applied them all to their ferry operation. When asked about other county splits, Mr. Monsen said the goal of state ferries is that 80% of ferry operating expenses are funded by the fare box and Pierce County aims for 70-75%. Fares for Pierce County are similar to Whatcom's, but for a 50-minute ride.

Web-based Ferry Ticket Project Status

Abart reported that Public Works is working with the Treasurer's office on the issue. An RFP for county-wide electronic payment processing was issued earlier this year and the RFP requires ferry ticketing to be addressed within the first 30 days of the contract. Treasurer Steve Oliver stated that he hoped to have a vendor selected this week. It does not appear that electronic ticketing onboard the ferry is part of the proposal however. Real-time authorizations are seen as problematic due to unreliable cellular connectivity on the ferry. The county does not want to be in possession of credit card information for any length of time, wanting it to pass immediately to a secure third-party vendor for processing. Kremen said electronic ticketing is a "hot button" for him and wants to see it as soon as possible. Steve Oliver would like to see the elimination of cash sales onboard the ferry. It just appears that weather-proof hardware and reliable connectivity have yet to be identified.

Ferry Kiosk Project Discussion

Abart is concerned that ticket sales through a kiosk at Gooseberry Point does not address how non-sufficient fund situations would be handled. Kremen interjected that a kiosk at Gooseberry Point might be at risk for vandalism. County Executive Louws said the state auditors office is demanding strict compliance to standards that most corporations do not have to meet. These standards include the use of only state-insured banks, the period of time before funds are deposited, and liability of credit card companies. He said eight proposals have been received. Oliver interjected that companies usually known to have this expertise such as Square and Intuit do not meet current state legislature requirements. Abart spoke of possibly running a pilot project with a kiosk on one of the county parking lots as the next step.

Needs-Based Ferry Tickets

Abart said that Public Works has been looking to eliminate the program, but second hand information makes that look unrealistic. He will now shift his focus to remove the administrative burden of the program and engage the Opportunity Council. He warned that the program “will not get cheaper or smaller, costs will increase”. Councilman Mann challenged Abart, asking whether he had the political will to make the program go away. Councilman Kremen asked whether LIFAC had shared a position on it yet. He commented that the initial champion of the program when it was initiated was Councilwoman Brenner and said this issue goes beyond LIFAC. It’s important to have input from LIFAC, but it’s a greater public policy issue that must meet state requirements and challenges.

Ferry Fare Surcharge Status

Abart reported that he was surprised that Councilman Crawford had challenged the \$3 surcharge (in the last meeting) since it is an ordinance. Abart said, “It is a chunk of revenue, a permanent fee.” Mann asked whether ridership had changed since the surcharge was imposed. Abart replied that ridership has “stabilized nicely”.

LIFAC Comments

Lummi Island Ferry Advisory Board (LIFAC) President Mike McKenzie was asked for comments. Mike said he was concerned about the communication challenges the committee faces, citing as an example that LIFAC was unaware that an RFP for electronic ticketing had been issued. Regarding the Monsen presentation, he encouraged the committee to refer to the “intent” of the original legislation and to “do the right thing” and apply those funds to the ferry fund. The move towards online purchases is enlightening, but kiosks are not in the county’s best interest because of the risk of vandalism. Regarding needs-based fare discounts, nobody is opposed to helping those in need. The question is whether this should be a government program or not. He said that LIFAC would bring a recommendation on Needs-based fares to the committee shortly.

Other Comments

Frank Abart clarified that web-based purchases are the primary focus of the initiative. Ticket purchases on the ferry is secondary.

Barbara Brenner was surprised to hear that communications was an issue for LIFAC and invited Mike to see her after the meeting. She said her committee was unaware of the RFP as well.

Pete Kremen said a few of the other council advisory committees had a councilperson on the committee. He suggested somebody from 3rd district or the councilman at large. Brenner said she was unavailable.

Bill Lee said that the old ferry and transportation committee held quarterly meetings with Public Works and which were beneficial to their work.

Frank Abart said he could be available for meetings with LIFAC on a quarterly basis. He also checked his records that ferry ridership between 2011 and 2012 showed passenger ridership down, but vehicle ridership up.

Jim Dickinson shared that ferry ridership is down as a result of the \$3 surcharge. Pete Kremen commented that the lease negotiations caused unease and distrust leading to a ridership decline.

Mary Ross commented that the school population was now halved with the loss of families due to the surcharge and trips by others are more measured.

Rhayma Blake commented that the \$3 surcharge had affected pedestrians disproportionately, making vehicle usage less of a premium. She also said that the disproportionate effect on the Needs-based pedestrian punch card is driving the recommendation to have a 10-ride ticket instead of a 25-ride ticket.