

MEETING SUMMARY
SAN JUAN ISLANDS VRS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MEETING
SAN JUAN ISLAND YACHT CLUB, FRIDAY HARBOR, WA
Wednesday, March 13, 2013 11:30 a.m. – 1:45 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, WSF Deputy Chief of Operations

George welcomed the group members and apologized for David Moseley being absent due to a meeting in Olympia with the new WSDOT Secretary of Transportation Lynn Peterson. George also explained that Heather Rogers will no longer be joining the VRS Partnership meetings due to a recent job change. He introduced Michael Hodgins of BERK & Associates, who will be facilitating future meetings.

Meeting Overview

Michael Hodgins, BERK & Associates

Michael introduced himself and asked the group to go around the room and introduce themselves briefly. He then went over the agenda.

Questions & Comments

1. (Jamie Stephens) Looking at this agenda I question what we haven't yet talked about, which is Anacortes. We have identified capital improvements and additional employees; is the funding locked in to do that? It's hard to look at this without knowing the percentage of the boats that will be reserved and the context of how you will load the boats.
2. (Pat McKay) Monday I went off island and spoke to some of the commercial drivers; they have some issues with the idea of doing reservations at Anacortes because in the summertime there are issues getting through the booths in time. What is the impact of having 80% of the boat reserved and processing those cars through the ticket booth and tag shack?

We have had several meetings with the Anacortes staff and contract agents to discuss reservation processing, how to stage the different categories of vehicles, and we are working on a plan for that. Many of them feel that it will work with some changes in the layout of vehicle staging. Our goal is to continue the discussions with them and bring the plan to you at a future meeting. The logistical details are not finalized yet; we will ask the Anacortes staff to make a suggestion as to the percentage of the space to make available for reservations, and how to split up that space to ensure that tourists can't take it all up. These are policy related issues that we will discuss further at the September meeting with this group; today we want to focus on customer types and the related benefits.

3. (John Whetten) What is going on now in Anacortes is not working; when traffic is heavy there is a tangle between commercial drivers and regular cars. I'm concerned that will get worse with reservations. If we had some assurance of how this is going to work, which seems to me to be a priority over cancellation issues, I would be more comfortable; if I had a better idea of the flow.
4. (Pat McKay) Vehicles have to get beyond the backup on the road and the booth before a reservation will do them any good.
We are still working on those details, so it is too early to bring to this group. We understand that the lanes at Anacortes are not being used effectively now and we are working on that. The goal of the reservations system is to eliminate the congestion, so that the line up the road does not exist. We see that there is an interest in the group to discuss operations at Anacortes, but we want to hold off on that for a little bit. We can move some of that discussion up to take place sooner than our September meeting since there is so much interest.
5. (Howie Rosenfeld) It sounds like having reservations may mean the possibility of more people showing up in a condensed period of time and making the situation worse rather than better. Maybe for the next meeting you can give us some clue of how you will handle that.
We can do that; that is a valid concern.
6. (Clark Johnson) I welcome the opportunity to have input on the agendas, but you need to be proactive about soliciting our input; so far you have just told us what it is.
Two meetings back we proposed agendas for all future meetings with this group. We are open to your input on the discussion topics; we laid out the meeting agendas in such a way as to cover everything we need but to also be respectful of your time.
7. (Ken Burtness) Can you send us the minutes of the meetings you're having with the staff at Anacortes?
The plan for Anacortes is a working document that is not ready to be presented; we are working through it and will present it to this group when it is ready. In the meantime you can use the Google Group as a forum to discuss this issue and let us know what you would like to see.
8. (Pay McKay) Until we eliminate the issues at Anacortes we can't accomplish anything; if people arrive 30 minutes ahead and can't get through the booth we've accomplished nothing.
We are working on that.
9. (John MacLeod) We are wasting time; they are not prepared to discuss this yet.
We may have a longer meeting next time and bring some of this into the discussion. Keep in mind that the summer of 2015 is the earliest that reservations will be in effect during a peak time.

Premier Program Options for the San Juan Islands

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed the summary of benefits and options for eligibility for the Premier Program (see pages 2-4 of the handout packet).

Questions & Comments

1. (John Whetten) Are you going to get rid of westbound allocations in exchange for this Premier Program?
Allocations and the Premier Program are separate issues, and we will have that discussion. The Premier Program has an element of priority access, it's a way of holding space.
That's what allocations do.
We think of allocations as island specific. This program divides the space by customer type. The issue of overlaying that with island allocations is something we need to discuss with this group.
2. (Gordon Jonasson) Within a boat with multiple destinations how do you divide the space?
That is part of our September meeting agenda; we will look at dividing up boat space.
3. (John Brantigan) The objective you have for the Premier Program is incorrect; it should be to automate the check-in process. You should have an automated way for people to swipe a card at the tollbooth. You want identification of everybody; why not open the Premier Program to anyone who wants to sign up for it?
The intent of this program is to prevent tourists from taking up all the space during peak times. People who can make long-term decisions about travel could reserve all the space; we want to hold space for people who live on the islands.
The problem with reservations is that they will favor one group over another unfairly. A clever person could book Friday westbound and Sunday eastbound reservations for the whole summer to the detriment of everybody else.
That's exactly what we are trying to prevent; we are trying to set aside space that will be open just for frequent users. Abuse of the system is a concern also and we will talk about those concerns. This system is flexible enough to make off-peak sailing reservations available a long time in advance, which would steer tourists onto those sailings.
4. (Margot Shaw) Is the Premier Program at Port Townsend / Coupeville?
It is tailored to be route-specific. We have one at Port Townsend / Coupeville but it does not have to be the same here.
It's there so tell us the success.
The Premier Program users at Port Townsend / Coupeville like not having to pay up front, they use the multi-ride passes, the group of users is not as large as we expect up here. The San Juan Islands look like the market that would need it the most. The eligibility for the program needs to be difficult enough that not everyone can enter it but not so restrictive that it doesn't benefit the island residents.
We appreciate the fact that you are trying to give frequent users these benefits.
5. (Ken Burtness) The reservation system will favor tourists who can plan ahead; this Premier Program should help to level things and make it fairer.
That is the intent.
6. (Jamie Stephens) It's worth noting that the next topic on the agenda is Change and Cancellation policies; it seems to me that if you don't have a deposit there is no mechanism to deter people from not showing up for their reservations.
In Port Townsend / Coupeville before we rolled out the new system there were no deposits and the no-show rate was very high. With the new system no-shows dropped considerably; there needs to be some impact if you don't show up and we will discuss

- that with this group. A no-show fee should be high enough that you want to show up, but not so high that it breaks the bank; we can discuss that dollar amount.*
7. (John MacLeod) The suspension part bothers me, how does that work? Say I missed the four trips a month, how would I get back from being suspended?
Let's table that discussion for now; we will come back to that at a later time.
 8. (Margot Shaw) Just to clarify, you would have to have a multi-ride ticket and do two round trips a month, is that an average?
No, it's two trips per month. We want to avoid people just joining for the summer months and enjoying all the benefits.
 9. (Clark Johnson) Being a frequent user of the ferry system is not the same as being a resident; a resident may have a real need to leave, but only once a month. Requiring two round trips a month won't work for everybody.
That is the drawback to Option 1. We won't reserve 100% of the vessel, so residents who travel infrequently can still go standby; that will never go away.
 10. (Jim Corenman) How will you make sure that the account is not being used by different people? Right now the multi-ride cards are shared.
We are not too concerned about that; if you sign up for the Premier Program and have your credit card on file, and then choose to let others use it that is your choice. You can share at your own risk; if you let others access it you will be financially responsible.
 11. (Gordon Jonasson) For Lopez, with no eastbound reservations, how do you get credit for sailing?
To get credit, we would count two reserved trips out of Anacortes as two round trips, since we assume you will travel both ways.
 12. (John MacLeod) My main concern is the monthly tracking; we don't want to get suspended. Why not consider it on a longer time scale rather than monthly, what about quarterly?
That's an option we can look at. One advantage of launching in fall is that we will have time to learn before the peak summer season. We can look at details like that and tweak as we go. We are trying to think about ways to do the process without having to add additional staff.
 13. (Jim Corenman) The problem with the revalue card is that you charge us after the fifth use rather than the first. We could go awhile before using the next one; why not change how it works and charge us on the first use?
We have looked at that and it would be a huge cost to make that change. The second reason is that you would be taking away the frequent rider aspect. You may use the first five quickly, but if you're not charged you could take a longer time to use the rides; the system could be manipulated.
 14. (Howie Rosenfeld) I am wondering if this group is made up of frequent users because we were selected that way. This group's focus is skewed toward frequent users. A huge percentage of island residents don't go off-island on a regular basis and couldn't use the Premier Program. This could be a deal killer.
 15. (John Whetten) After the fourth use if you expect not to use the card you can suspend it, and not get recharged until you unsuspend it?
Correct, but we stipulate an active card to be able to participate. If we allow the suspensions it takes away from the frequent use aspect.
 16. (Sally Thomsen) I like Jim's suggestion. I am not a frequent user and I think a lot of residents are sporadic users. I support the revalue card that is charged on its first use.

17. (Jamie Stephens) You can still make a reservation without being part of this Premier Program, correct?
Yes, you just would not have access to the special space put aside for Premier Program users. Dividing the vessel space by customer type will give you access to certain amounts of space which could vary by sailing. There are different ways of creating access to balance everyone's needs.
18. (John Whetten) Why does the WSF staff prefer Option 1?
It is less restrictive. We have heard a negative response about the revalue card at Port Townsend / Coupeville. We are listening to the feedback and bringing it to this group for discussion.
19. (Howie Rosenfeld) If you're the average worker bee that shares a multi-ride card with someone in your office, they would still be able to do that but they couldn't make a reservation?
Correct.
That would have a severe impact on a lot of people. The more difficult or expensive you make it for people who live here the less they will live here or ride the ferries here. The goal should be to make it easier to ride the ferry, not harder.
20. (Bill Pike) This raises the question of what I saw as being resolvable with a credit card number on deposit for the islands where there is no fare collection mechanism. Make a reservation from Anacortes to Friday Harbor with the multi-ride card, provide a credit card number at the time of the reservation in anticipation of a no-show penalty, show up and provide the reservation number and the multi-ride card.
That is an option that we will talk about at the next meeting; that may work.
Conceptually it could work in both directions.
21. (Larry Vandermay) To clarify, we use the Wave To Go revalue card, it works for us. By carrying that we can mix and match: drive up if we want and also make reservations other times.
That's what we will discuss at the next meeting. If you pay a deposit up front you would not be able to pay the balance of the reservation with the multi-ride card. If you don't have a deposit you can pay with that card at the booth.
22. (John MacLeod) I'm in a lot of frequent flyer programs and each one has a number that identifies me. My credit card or other personal information may change but my identification number stays the same. You should give a unique number to each account that doesn't change no matter how they pay.
We like that idea as well; unfortunately our current ticketing system won't allow that. In the future when we change ticketing systems we will include that ability; we are limited right now.
I've done software design my whole life; this is a trivial change.
The cost is high because we have a third party owned ticketing system; we are looking at different options for the future.
23. (Jim Corenman) WSF doesn't have their own software?
Not all of our software is third party owned, but EFS was off the shelf and we are licensed to use it but we cannot make changes to it. It was rolled out in 2007, and we are looking to change it in the 2015-2018 timeframe.

Michael asked the group to go around the room and state which option they prefer.

24. (Deborah Hopkins) I like Option 2 with the ability to suspend.
25. (Bill Pike) Option 1, although I don't feel comfortable with any of them at this point. I would like to see it more like a frequent flyer program with an identification number assigned.
26. (John MacLeod) Option 1, but I'm concerned about what happens if you get suspended. I chose this option because I don't like the revalue card.
27. (Margot Shaw) Option 1 with tweaks.
28. (John Poletti) Option 1.
29. (Jamie Stephens) Option 1 with a tweak for a customer account number.
30. (John Brantigan) Everyone should be a Premier and you should use that to automate the check-in process.
31. (Sally Thomsen) Option 2 with Jim's tweak.
32. (Ken Burtness) Option 1.
33. (Beverly Zapalac) Option 1.
34. (Gordon Jonasson) Option 1 or 2.
35. (John Whetten) Option 2 with Jim's tweak.
36. (Larry Vandermay) Option 2.
37. (Jim Corenman) Option 2 with my tweak.
38. (Pat McKay) Option 1.
39. (Clark Johnson) Option 1, but I'm concerned that all the options will disenfranchise residents.
40. (Howie Rosenfeld) You need to favor island residents; it should not be limited to what your definition of a frequent user is. You need to accommodate the sporadic, infrequent users who are residents.

Change and Cancel Policies

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian reviewed the change and cancel policies at other ferry systems, and went over WSF's proposed change and cancel policies for the San Juan Islands (see pages 5-7 of the handout packet).

Questions & Comments

1. (Gordon Jonasson) What are you doing at Port Townsend / Coupeville?
We are charging a deposit for non-Premier users. Premier and Commercial users don't get charged if they are late, but they do get charged a no-show fee in the amount of the deposit if they don't show up at all that day. In the San Juans there is no fare collection system eastbound so there can be no deposit. We want to introduce a no-show fee which we will discuss further in our May meeting.
2. (Gordon Jonasson) You say here that late people go to "the back of the drive-up line," is that for the same sailing?
If there is a long standby line you may not get on; you are in the first come, first served line at that point.
3. (Jim Corenman) Why not have a fee for calling to make a change but not if you make your change online?
That is an option.

4. (Bill Pike) That is not unprecedented; airlines are like that because you have to pay someone to answer the phone.
5. (John MacLeod) Phone systems are easy to automate.
We have spoken to other systems about that and they say it is actually pretty cumbersome; we are looking at that option.
6. (Gordon Jonasson) I am opposed to penalizing people for using the phone. I don't have a computer with me when I'm driving; it's not right.
That is a concern.
7. (Pat McKay) Older people would be penalized by that.
8. (Larry Vandermay) We have to remember, we should not be comparing our system to Port Townsend / Coupeville. They only have to wait an hour; we could be waiting five hours. They also can drive around and we can't.
We are keeping that in mind, but we have to have some policy in place for changing or cancelling reservations so that we have a good idea of who is actually coming.
9. (Margot Shaw) How will the terminal staff know about the customer who is late but travels later in the day?
The reservation barcode; you would tell them at the booth that you are late for a reservation. They would scan your barcode and the system will redeem it so that it reflects that you showed up.
Anybody who's involved in changing, cancelling or being late, all of these would count toward your reserved trips?
Yes, even a no-show fee will be associated with your travel count.
10. (Gordon Jonasson) Special events such as FAC meetings or weddings, especially at Shaw, where people come in large groups like 150 at a time, how will you handle that?
We work with the terminal agents for special events to adjust the system for those days; the system is flexible enough to allow for that.
11. (Beverly Zapalac) I only go to Anacortes to see a doctor, dentist or accountant, basically people who are never on schedule. Would it be advisable for me to make a reservation? What if I show up early?
At Port Townsend / Coupeville if you go through the tollbooth for an earlier sailing you go into the standby line. If you take the chance to try to get on a boat earlier than the one you reserved there is the possibility that you won't get on and then you have forfeited your reserved space on the next sailing.
12. (Jamie Stephens) What type of lead time would you need for that event thing, like a wedding?
We have only done community events, not weddings, but that is a good policy discussion that we need to have with this group.
13. (Bill Pike) If hotels allow you to book a block of rooms for weddings, why couldn't you?
We see the point, but we don't want hotels blocking our space and discouraging travel because the space appears to be full.

Brian asked the group for a show of hands of those who think the proposed policies seem reasonable (14 of 17 group members raised their hands).

14. (John Whetten) When do we discuss what happens when WSF cancels a sailing?
There is a service disruption discussion scheduled for a future meeting.

15. (John MacLeod) This is all based on the assumption that there will be no charge for making a reservation. I think you should charge something for the ability to make a reservation during peak sailing times. It could bring in revenue for you and drive people toward off peak sailings.
We will save that discussion for a future meeting: a surcharge for peak reservations.
16. (Margot Shaw) Which of these examples of different ferry systems comes the closest to ours physically?
It's hard to say, BC Ferries has a couple runs that are similar, but there really is no industry standard. Each system is different; there is no system that operates just like WSF.
Comparing us to Port Townsend / Coupeville is somewhat relevant but not entirely.
Correct.
17. (Sally Thomsen) I don't want the peak fee to penalize sporadic travelers from the islands.
We will discuss that further in May.
18. (Deborah Hopkins) Will there be a process for us to review these policies after rollout?
Yes, we plan to have a debrief meeting a few months after rollout, and then again after the first summer season. This is an ongoing relationship.

Updates on Improved Customer Information

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed the changes coming to improve customer access to information about WSF (see page 8 of the handout packet).

Conclusion

George thanked the group for their ongoing participation, and asked that any other thoughts be posted on the Google Group forum for discussion in between meetings. Meeting was adjourned.

Group Members

Present	Name of Group Member	Representing
	Adrienne Adams	Lopez Island
	Mike Aley	Orcas Island
	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
	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
X	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
X	Sally Thomsen	San Juan Island
X	Larry Vandermay	Orcas Island
X	John Whetten	Lopez Island
Skype	Susan Young	Lopez Island
X	Beverly Zapalac	Lopez Island

Project Team

- George Capacci, WSF Deputy Chief of Operations
- Marta Coursey, WSF Director of Communications
- Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations
- Michael Hodgins, BERK & Associates
- Rachel Waitt, WSF Communications Staff