

## An islander's view of the regional ferry plan | Guest Column

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by **Randall Gaylord**

Legislators in Olympia should sink Governor Chris Gregoire's proposal for a new taxing district to operate the Washington State Ferries. By ordinary performance measures, the ferries float just fine. They are safe, efficient, cost-effective, and are a big draw for visitors.

If the ferry system has problems with its capital needs or operations, then let's address those problems head-on instead of using unproductive rhetoric. The ferries don't need a "bail out" like big business on Wall Street.

And it's not a "band aid" when changes are made to operations, collective bargaining agreements, fare box recovery or tax contributions.

Adding a new taxing district to make up a "third leg of the stool" assumes that people who live close to terminals should pay more. Well, they do pay more – every time they pay their fare on the ferry. Otherwise, the state's share should be spread throughout the state, just as the cost is shared when state gas tax money is used on road, tunnels and bridges that may never be used by those who live far away.

Much is said of the "subsidy" as if it is some evil. Since the Toll Bridge Authority took over the Black Ball Ferry line in 1951, the state has always contributed tax money to the operation of the ferries. Using state gas tax funds is sensible for public transit on the state highways and the state scenic highways of the ferry routes. This does not mean the ferries are some extravagance. Indeed, for those in the San Juan Islands, there is no other way to get around.

General tax payments are good in public transportation and common everywhere – at the airport, at the train station, at the bus station, and at the ferries. It avoids bottlenecks, assures we link together the ways we travel. It allows people rich and poor alike to move about visit family and friends, get medical treatment, attend school, worship at church, exchange goods, go the store and otherwise assure we have a vibrant prosperous state.

A subsidy or surplus could be used as one performance measure. A 2010 report shows that the subsidy at the Washington state ferries is among the lowest of any ferry system in the world at just \$3.49 per passenger. Other public transit operates where the fare box exceeds expenses. Compare King County Metro with a subsidy of \$2.63 per passenger, and Amtrak Cascades which has been subsidized in the amount of \$334 million in 10 years, a whopping \$27.30 per passenger. Before voting on this measure legislators should calculate the amount of taxes used for transportation in their district, for they may be the next in line for a regionalization proposal.

For 60 years, state leaders have foregone building bridges and highways and instead knit together the constitution, statutes and road system to include ferries. This provides a solid, egalitarian way of passage across our unique waterways. Please don't undo it now.

*Randall Gaylord is the San Juan County Prosecutor. He lives on Orcas Island.*

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