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Corrected version

## Kingston-Seattle foot ferry costs public \$35,000 for each rider

After a quarterly review revealed the foot-ferry has drained more than \$1 million in Port of Kingston reserves and is on track to burn \$52,000 a month for the rest of this year, the three-member Port Commission is considering shutting it down and selling off the two 149-passenger boats.

By Emily Heffter

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At the end of each workday in downtown Seattle, Dan McDougall walks two blocks and boards the SoundRunner passenger ferry to Kingston. His 50-minute ride comes with free Wi-Fi and \$3 premium beer. It gets him home 40 minutes faster than the Washington State Ferries route via Bainbridge Island.

It's an enjoyable commute, but one that has attracted so few riders in its first 18 months of operation that taxpayers are subsidizing each passenger at a rate of about \$35,000 a year.

After a quarterly review this month revealed the foot-ferry has drained more than \$1 million in Port of Kingston reserves and is on track to burn \$52,000 a month for the rest of 2012, the three-member Port Commission is considering shutting it down and selling off the two 149-passenger boats.

"It's bleeding money pretty bad," said commission Chairman Marc Bissonnette. "We were really hoping that we could get to a higher level of passengers before now."

Kingston is a tiny town on the north Kitsap Peninsula known mostly for its ferry run to Edmonds. It's growing, and recently added a dry cleaner, but life there is timed by the ferries that pull in and out of the docks, tying the community to economic lifelines on the mainland.

The Port of Kingston owns a marina and leases its ferry dock to the state ferry system. In 2007, after a privately run passenger ferry to Seattle failed, a group of commuters wrote a grant for the Port to get \$3.5 million for a ferry that could make two daily trips to Seattle. They got the federal grant — and bought two boats.

Money-losing ferry lines are a familiar story around here, and now that the SoundRunner has joined the list, riders and taxpayers are at odds about how much subsidy the ferry deserves and who will be to blame for its expensive demise.

"It's indefensible at the current subsidy and ridership level," said Nels Sultan, a regular rider who helped apply for the grant five years ago. "It's very sad. ... The support is falling apart, not just for the money, but for the fumbling and mismanagement by the Port."

Sultan says the Port bought boats that were too big and has run them too often. The line has struggled with boat-engine problems, management turnover and a reputation for being undependable. The first SoundRunner started with great fanfare in October 2010, but then the boat broke down and had to be repaired a month later. It didn't start running again until the end of May.

Signage, Sultan said, is so bad that the ferry is "kind of a secret."

The schedule isn't coordinated well with the buses on the Kitsap side, sometimes leaving riders stranded if the boat is running late, McDougall said.

Perhaps most limiting is the fact that government employees with subsidized Orca transit cards can't use them on the SoundRunner. If the SoundRunner qualifies next year, the cards will start working in October.

Port officials couldn't be reached to respond to these specific complaints.

On average this year, about 20 people have taken the boat from Kingston to Seattle in the morning, and between 30 and 35 ride it back in the evening. The people who ride it disparage the state ferry as a "cattle car."

Desperate to draw new riders, the commission decided to lower the fare from \$7 a ride to \$5. But it might be too late. The Port budgeted \$200,000 a year for the first few years to help the boats get started. That hasn't been nearly enough. In just the first three months of 2012, almost all the money set aside for the year has been spent: \$176,704. Port staffers expect to lose \$441,536 more by the end of 2012.

The commission will consider three options Monday: keep going for now and reconsider in the fall, quit and sell the boats, or change to a summer-only schedule.

"I actually really think it would be a tragedy if the commission pulls the plug prematurely," said Sandy Taylor, who drives a van pool to Hansville each day from the ferry dock. She wants the Port to extend its commitment to the ferry — at least for a while.

"We're not asking the commission to grant an unlimited amount of money for all time."

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