

Modern Passenger Only Ferry History in the Puget Sound

The Puget Sound has a long history of passenger ferry transportation. At the turn of the 20th century the Puget Sound Navigation Company, operating under the name Black Ball Line, ran a passenger ferry system known as the “mosquito fleet, between Seattle, Olympia, Tacoma, Port Townsend, Everett, Bellingham, Victoria, Vancouver, Bremerton, Vashon Island and Bainbridge Island. By 1910 Black Ball ferries were carrying 2 million passengers a year. After World War II improvements in and expansions of the country’s highways made travel by land easier and faster than water transportation. Black Ball eventually replaced the mosquito fleet with auto and passenger carrying ferries.

During the transition to auto ferries Black Ball Line began to experience financial distress. Responding to the need to generate more revenue Black Ball Line implemented several fare increases which caused a public outcry and led the Transportation Commission to order a roll back. In counter Black Ball Line terminated it’s charter for ferry service with the State and the State passed legislation that authorized the purchase of Black Ball Line. On May 31, 1951 the State bought Black Ball Line for \$4.9 million. WSF now operates the country’s largest auto ferry service with 25 vessels carrying over 26 million passengers to 20 different ports.

The first modern experiment in passenger only ferry service occurred in the summer of 1978 when, in conjunction with Boeing, Washington State Ferries (WSF) operated a Boeing Jetfoil for six weeks on the Puget Sound. Although WSF found the Jetfoil to be too expensive to run it was determined that in the long run high-speed passenger only ferry service offered a viable means of reducing automobile usage and promoting passenger travel.

After the Jetfoil experiment, the issue of passenger only ferry service was not taken up again until 1984 when WSF conducted a planning study for their 1990-2000 Long Range Plan Update. This study highlighted worsening traffic congestion and steadily growing ridership on the State’s auto ferries and recommended the introduction of passenger only ferry service from downtown Seattle to Bremerton, Vashon and Southworth. At the same time a business group from Bremerton was urging the Washington State Transportation Commission, the governing board of WSF, to concentrate a passenger only ferry demonstration project on Bremerton in an effort to bolster redevelopment efforts in that City and to improve ferry service for Kitsap County residents.

In 1985 WSF purchased the Express (later known as the Tyee) a catamaran built by Nichols Brother of Whidbey Island for \$2.5 M using a \$1.6 grant from the Urban Mass Transit Authority (now know as the Federal Transit Authority(FTA)). The vessel carried 319 passengers and operated at a cruising speed of 23 knots between Seattle and Bremerton. In 1989 WSF added two new monohulls, the Skagit and Kalama, built at Equitable Shipyards of the Halter Group in Louisiana.

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Carrying 250 passengers at a cruising speed of 25 knots these vessels were used to expand service to Bremerton and initiate service to Vashon Island.

Residents along Rich Passage, a narrow body of water between Bainbridge Island and the Kitsap Peninsula on the Seattle Bremerton route, raised concerns about the shoreline damage being caused by the large wakes of the high speed passenger only ferries. A consultant hired by the State found that if the passenger only ferries were allowed to continue to run at full speed beach erosion and bulkhead deterioration would probably be accelerated. This finding prompted WSF to slow the vessels to less than 12 knots through Rich Passage increasing the travel time from 40 minutes to 55 minutes, a savings of only 5 minutes over the auto ferry crossing. Despite efforts to design and acquire vessels that would reduce wake wash and shoreline erosion through the acquisition of the Chinook in 1998 and Snohomish in 1999, WSF was unsuccessful in resuming high speed service to Bremerton.

Responding to diminishing ferry funding caused by taxpayer initiatives and dwindling ridership, the Transportation Commission announced in 2002 their intention to eliminate passenger only ferry service in 2003. The Washington State Legislature approved the elimination of passenger only service to Bremerton in September 2003 but extended funds for passenger only service to Vashon. At the same time, the Legislature approved new legislation granting Kitsap Transit the opportunity to ask the residents of Kitsap County to support a passenger only ferry plan providing service initially from Southworth, Bremerton and Kingston to downtown Seattle.