

MEETING SUMMARY
SAN JUAN ISLANDS VRS COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP MEETING
SAN JUAN ISLAND YACHT CLUB, FRIDAY HARBOR, WA
Thursday, November 14, 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

David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary

David welcomed the group and gave a Legislative session update. He apologized for Michael Hodgins not being present, and noted that Brian Churchwell would cover Michael's sections of the agenda.

Meeting Overview

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian went over the agenda, the meeting objectives and the four handouts, which contain updated information from what was originally sent out to the group.

Overall Program Implementation Schedule

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian went over the Preliminary Implementation Schedule handout.

Questions & Comments

1. (Bill Pike) The no-show fee versus the deposit—is that happening at Port Townsend/Coupeville?
We are moving all routes to the no-show fee. It is easier to communicate to our customers when all routes operate the same way. It also decreases the processing time at the tollbooth, and gives customers the flexibility to purchase multiride tickets or convenience cards. We will implement it at Port Townsend/Coupeville with the spring 2014 schedule.
Are you looking at a flat rate or a percentage?
The WAC says it has to be 25-100% of the fare, and we have to vary it by vehicle fare type, so unfortunately there will be no simple flat rate across the board.
2. (Wally Gudgell) Why are we having so many meetings? Can't the process be sped up?
We can continue to do it this way, with a shorter meeting every couple of months, or we can have fewer, all day meetings. We have seen from our work

with other partnership groups that the shorter meetings are easier, but we are willing to change that if that's what the group wants.

3. (Susan Young) I like what we have now. You are able to take our comments back and adjust accordingly. I see a value in that now that I didn't see before. *The topics so far have been pretty intense; once we get through discussing release of space we will be able to move through the business rules topics more quickly.*

Brian asked the group for a consensus about the meeting schedule, and the group agreed to continue with the shorter meetings every 6-8 weeks.

4. (Clark Johnson) The downside of the piecemeal approach is you think you can make decisions about topics as if they are independent. For instance, today's topic is affected by the policy of how you will handle interrupted service. Also, today's topic of having confirmed space overcommitted affects those of us who need space in the last couple of days prior to sailing. *We agree. The service disruption discussion will take a couple of hours in itself. We will have that next; we may need to modify our operations here from what we have in Port Townsend/Coupeville.*
One small request is that we all understand that the decisions made today are based on the best of our understanding of how the system will work, and we may need to rethink them when we have more details. *Correct, and when we Go Live we will monitor and modify the business rules as we need to. We are working on putting together a packet that reflects all that we have discussed as a group so far, so you will be able to see all of the information together in one place. We are aiming to have that ready for the next meeting.*
5. (Susan Young) I would say that waiting well into 2014 for the external communications is late; you can start educating people now. You already are with the beta website; release that publicly and put up some signage to educate the public about what's coming. Regardless of how you implement the system, the sooner you start to educate the public, the better. *We will be going live with the real-time terminal conditions webpage shortly, you will see a press release to that affect and it will be in David's Weekly as well as in our web Spotlight.*
6. (John Whetten) When will you be going live with that? *Next week. There is a link to it on our webpage already; we have just not advertised it yet.*
7. (John MacLeod) My concern is that if you start broad marketing of the system too soon, you won't be prepared to answer all of the questions that will result. It's better to wait; I think there is a point that is too early.
8. (Wally Gudgell) For the public education process, I think you should target certain markets, such as VRBO. It would be nice if they were trained on how to

walk their customers through making a ferry reservation; tourists will need that kind of help.

That's a great idea.

9. (Margot Shaw) Someone asked me this morning if they could access information about this process; where can they get that?

The link is on our homepage; all the documents we use in our meetings are public and available for viewing. Go to www.wsdot.wa.gov/ferries and under the About Us heading in the center of the page you will find the Plans, Publications and Statistics link. From there click the link titled Vehicle Reservations System Planning.

I saw an article about reservations in Orcas Issues; judging from the comments it was pretty confusing for people.

That was actually taken from our planning page and was not a WSF written document; we have talked to them about that.

10. (Clark Johnson) In terms of marketing, I think it's as important as the infrastructure itself. I would like to see you take an additional step—I would like to know how successful the marketing is. Do people know about reservations when they get to the tollbooth? If not, then that shows you the marketing is not effective enough. It would be terrific if we could demonstrate that we can do it; targeting special groups is a great idea.

We have some experience to draw on from the Port Townsend/Coupeville rollout.

Is it possible in a future meeting that Marta can have time on the agenda to describe the success of the marketing rollout?

We can definitely put marketing success on the agenda.

11. (Wally Gudgell) The VRBO thing is huge and people don't realize it yet. Each entity has its own website; there is no reason they couldn't have a link to yours on there as well. Part of targeted education is to make it easier for people to get to you. The other thing is, you're going to find that reservation percentages are going to be higher in busier months than you show in your stats because we are isolated here. You can't drive away; people that come here already have a hotel booked because there's no place to go if they don't. I would like to see targeted and general public education, including use of links on other websites and social media.

12. (Jamie Stephens) It may be too early right now, but I think there may be a value in setting up the kiosk in Anacortes early to help educate people even before reservations are rolled out.

We can look at that.

13. (Bill Pike) Didn't we discuss the group acting as a liaison with our communities? We could be very helpful to you.

Yes, we can talk about that at our next meeting with the marketing package.

14. (Carol Anderson) I see the training on the new system coincides with the Go Live date; my concern is that training should be in place in advance so that when they go live they know what they're doing.

- We completely agree, these dates are not confirmed and we will make sure training takes place prior to the Go Live date.*
15. (Wally Gudgell) Why is it taking so long?
We need to finish getting input from our communities through meetings with this group, and there are long lead times on permitting and construction necessary to implement the system.
A year ago we were looking at a different timeline.
The original timeline had a Go Live date right after the summer schedule. What we heard from our staff is that summer is too busy a time to conduct training, so we moved it out to the end of December 2014. We will begin training right around this time next year.
16. (Jim Corenman) When we started this process, you told us it was an exploration into whether or not reservations make sense in the islands. Is there a review of whether this is a go or no-go? You look as if you presume to go forward, and there are still some unanswered pieces for us.
We've gone through each piece to see if it's feasible so far, and have adjusted everything per your comments. I think we will keep going forward until we hit something that absolutely will not work for you. We will keep building out the operating plan until that happens.
17. (Pat McKay) Are you adding staff to process cars faster, or planning on multiple check-in points? What are the things that are going to make it work?
Yes, we are budgeting for extra staff.
18. (John Brantigan) At the last meeting Howie and Clark mentioned the need to identify problems and solutions, specifically processing cars at the tollbooths and the comingling of cars with and without reservations. Clark had the idea that all cars should be reserved; we need to see all of this written down.
That was the purpose of the discussion at the last meeting; we are building off of Clark's idea. Everyone liked that concept so we have been heading down that path, and we are putting together an analysis to see if we need to increase staffing in Anacortes as well as in the islands. We may need all four booths open, and there is the question of whether that will create a bottleneck at the tag shack.
19. (Clark Johnson) The common thread in our observations is that we are frustrated by this piecemeal approach to solving the problems. Discussing interrelated issues isolated from the big picture is frustrating. We voted and almost everyone said reservations are a good idea, but what will make or break the system are the details.

Release of Reservation Space

Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations

Brian discussed the release of reservation space proposal (see Release of Reservation Space Summary Discussion Guide).

Questions & Comments

1. (Margot Shaw) What was the reason that one of the routes turned down the tiered release of space?
That was discussed in our Edmonds/Kingston Partnership Group meetings, and there are operational challenges there with the tiered space release concept. The concern from that group was that if you don't have portions of the boat reserved for different types of users, then certain users would take up all the available space. That's where the Premier Program idea came from.
2. (Wally Gudgell) Are you still talking about having kiosks?
We have not decided yet; there is a maintenance issue with that idea.
We need to use modern IT options; what about a QR code you can swipe with your iPhone, or an app? Most people will not have to physically walk up to a kiosk. How will people present their reservation? Will people still have to go through the toll booth?
All cars will have to go through the tollbooths in Anacortes; there is no way to avoid that.
3. (John Brantigan) You don't have to do it at the booth; this won't work unless you can get people past the booth without checking in.
The Coast Guard has a requirement that we physically see every passenger; people cannot skip the booth.
Can't you check them in once they're in line?
We don't want them to make it into the holding lanes if they don't have a reservation. We realize we need to figure out the issue of long processing time at the booths.
4. (Wally Gudgell) What about using a handheld to walk up the line at the tollbooth? Would that satisfy the Coast Guard?
That's what we do at Port Townsend/Coupeville; it's a matter of the extra staffing required. People would still need to stop at the booth to pay their fares. We are looking at all the options.
5. (Terresa Sundstrom) I'm going to throw out a scenario: a sixteen-year-old goes to Mt. Vernon for some shopping and needs to get back. He may or may not have a credit card. Low-income people live here who may not have technology in their homes; no iPhone either.
That's a good point. When we are talking about percentages of the boat to reserve, we want to make sure we are leaving room for those users.
6. (Clark Johnson) Couldn't you enter into a different type of contractual agreement with that small offset of people who are low-income? Be flexible with them, work with them.
7. (Pat McKay) They should not have to prove they are low-income to get on a ferry; that's discrimination. They should not be singled out.

8. (Margot Shaw) What's the maximum amount of time ahead that the schedule is available?
We try for six months, but realistically expect one to two months.
When this gets implemented it will have to be a set time.
That's correct.
9. (Bill Pike) On the date that each quarterly schedule is released, wouldn't that automatically be the first release of space?
We like that idea, and it has worked well for our commercial users.
Then the last release is the day before, so we are only talking about when to do the second release.
Well, we can discuss the last release as well, whether you want day of or day before.
10. (Sally Thomsen) When will you know which vessel will be on the route to know which is the smallest?
We have the maintenance schedule, so we generally know which vessels will be on which routes. However, there are unexpected mechanical problems that we can't foresee.
11. (Susan Young) Realistically, looking at the problems with the boats in the last year, I think it's a good idea to use the smallest boat number all the time. If you always book for the smallest then you can add more, but if you promise more space and then end up with a smaller boat you've got problems.
12. (Bill Pike) Now you're mixing in the service disruption element; it's good you're thinking about that.
You'll see from our stats that people don't really book that far in advance, so when we have unplanned switches we should be able to handle it.
13. (Wally Gudgell) I want to reiterate that booking times will be different from these stats. You want to make sure you're filling up the boats too; you don't want to sail off with half-filled boats.
That's the crux of the issue right there. It's not just a profitability standpoint, but service as well. The nice thing is we can move the timeframe around, and if we find that different numbers work at different times we can change that as well.
14. (Ken Burtness) One of the major strengths of the system is that you can change times and percentages and adjust it infinitely to get what you need.
15. (Carol Anderson) When guests make reservations at a hotel on one of the islands it would be optimal if they could make their ferry reservation at the same time.
How far in advance do your customers make their reservations?
It varies.
From our discussions with Deborah it sounds like some are as far as six months in advance with their hotel reservations, but they don't think about the logistics of transportation until later.
16. (Margot Shaw) I see a problem with moving the times around often. If we don't know when that's happening it will be a problem.

- We want the parameters to be static; but we will monitor it so that we can adjust it if necessary.*
17. (Clark Johnson) We're not sitting in the room with you when you're doing your planning, so we only get this one shot. I want to emphasize how important it is to be creative. For example, the whole purpose of this is if a reservation is not available on Friday at X time, you can see that other sailings are available. At three months out that's an easy switch for someone to make. The other thing is that if nothing is available, you should be able to sign up to be alerted if space opens up. There is lots of technological variability; weave it together to make it work.
18. (Larry Vandermay) Why can't customers be waitlisted?
We talked about that; if the first release of space gets reserved and then we offer a waitlist, the second release never benefits anyone because the space is taken by waitlisters.
19. (Jamie Stephens) Looking at this information, do we need that second release? It seems like if there is space available you can get a confirmed space.
We are thinking that the first release would be mostly commercial users and vacationers. The second release would be for those people who have a place here, weekenders, someone who makes travel decisions two weeks to a month ahead of time. Then the final release would be for more spontaneous travel for residents. There are different customer types that would gravitate toward different timeframes.
I think with the technology available people are making decisions on a faster timeframe, but I'm thinking of the schools and Parks and Recreation in the summer—are they going to be able to get reservations when they need them.
20. (Bill Pike) I think it would be easier to take out the second release after using it then it would be to try and put it in later.
We think the opposite; it's hard to take away something that customers already have.
Not if you're only taking it away because it's unnecessary.
21. (John Brantigan) My feeling is the second release is definitely needed. People on the islands who need to make a medical appointment a week or two out, knowing that they could make it would be great. If you just have to get in line and hope you make it you may end up having to cancel a doctor appointment.
22. (Susan Young) I would say that having the second release gives WSF the ability to be more flexible and responsive to different situations. It's easier to add the third release later if you need it; it's simpler to deal with two rather than three. Right now I make a doctor appointment and get in line hours early to be sure I make it. If I could get online a couple days ahead and make a reservation that would work great for me.

The group took a ten minute break, then Brian picked back up with the Conceptual Starting Point section of the handout along with the Distribution of Days in Advance attachment.

23. (Wally Gudgell) I want to reiterate again, I have six vacation rentals and they are booked for next summer already. I think the advance reservations will be significantly different here.
We are thinking about that, which is why we were so surprised to see the numbers on the international run. Only 15.6 average days in advance for international travel.
The rentals here are typically booked a year in advance and a minimum of three months in advance.
24. (Susan Young) I think an awful lot of what happens will depend on what we teach people to do. We can teach them to check at three months and not to worry if there's no space, but to check again at the second release time. With this software WSF can make adjustments based on usage. What we don't want is for people to behave like they do at Martha's Vineyard, where residents can't get off the island because of the tourists booking all the spots.
25. (John MacLeod) I want to echo what Wally is saying. July and August tend to book up a year in advance, and the State camp site is reserved nine months in advance. Sidney is not a good example; there are so many hotels in Victoria that aren't booked up. We have limited availability here and people book ahead. Telling people to pay money for a hotel and not to worry about how they get there won't work; people want assurance.
26. (Susan Young) What do you tell them now? Do you lose people because they don't get on the first boat? You will be able to offer them confirmed space, which you can't do now.
27. (Bill Pike) We talked about this in our very first meeting; these are islands and people can't get here any other way. If someone can't make a reservation on one sailing, there will be other sailings that day. It would be pretty unusual that another boat isn't available.
28. (Sally Thomsen) Can you give us actual numbers for the smallest vessel, rather than percentages?
The Sealth is 90 cars, so a 30% release would be 30 spaces. The second release could be more geared toward the vessel that we are pretty sure will be on the route. Another option would be to do the first release as 30% of the bigger vessel, then have the second release of space reflect a smaller boat capacity.
29. (Jamie Stephens) I'm concerned that you keep saying you're worried about filling up the boat. People are still going to be driving up, or confirming whichever sailing they can make from Burlington. I don't think this is going to curtail people from getting on the boat.
30. (Pat McKay) Once you have used a reservation, you will never go without one, I promise you.
31. (Jamie Stephens) I agree, I just don't feel this will be an impediment to filling the boats.

32. (John MacLeod) What percentage of that first 30% release will be taken up by commercial users?
You probably will not be impacted by commercial users. They tend to take up the tall space on the very early a.m. sailings out of Anacortes, and return in the early afternoon. It doesn't impact most of our customers.
33. (Clark Johnson) It would help if you could come up with an algorithm that lets you know that you need to change the 30%.
34. (John Brantigan) You're not addressing the main problem which is thousands of people arriving in Anacortes at the same time. I think the objective should be to load 95% capacity as efficiently as possible rather than trying to cram as many people on the boats as you can. We know when we can drive right up and get on; you need to fix times like the Fourth of July.
That's what we are doing with the three releases of space, and communicating to everybody to show up with a reservation. Locals know they can just show up for certain sailings, and that's fine.
35. (John Whetten) It's important to notify people that if the boat is full they can make a reservation for the next boat, before they get to the terminal. It's still first-come, first-served, just on the internet rather than at the terminal.
36. (Margot Shaw) Would you be able to tweak the percentages for different sailings during a day when you know some will be busier?
It would be very difficult operationally to vary the percentages by sailing or day; we need to make it consistent so that we can spread the demand.
37. (Jim Corenman) I agree that it should be uniform across all sailings, but it's important that the software has the capability to make tweaks if necessary.
The software is robust enough to do that. We tried varying the percentages at Port Townsend/Coupeville and it caused too much confusion. We got a lot of complaints, so the lesson learned for us is to avoid that confusion here. We do have the ability if needed.
38. (Clark Johnson) The way you're describing it is the inverse of what you should do; there should be less space available on peak sailings and therefore other sailings would be more desirable.
39. (Susan Young) So the percentages we're discussing include commercial users?
Yes.
Why take a successful program that you have with them and change it?
We don't segment the space now; they are just the only users that can make reservations at this point. This will not change the way commercial users make reservations.

Brian asked the room if they agree that the release of space concept makes sense as presented; the group said yes, with a few caveats:

- The group would like to see actual numbers of spaces for vessels, rather than just percentages
- 50% for the second release is too high

- The group would like more space released on the day before/day of

Public Comments

1. You are on the right track; thank you for your work on this. Please stay with the three releases. The object is to give customers certainty. The percentage you pick can be whatever; don't let perfection stand in the way of execution. Brian will crunch the numbers and figure out the tweaks. The object is to get something in place and get it going so we don't have to sit in line for hours to come up here.

Conclusion

Brian asked the group which topics they would like to cover at the next meeting; the group agreed on service disruptions and communications. The next meeting date is yet to be determined, probably sometime in early February 2014. Brian thanked everyone for coming. Meeting was adjourned.

Group Members

Present	Name of Group Member	Representing
	Adrienne Adams	Lopez Island
	Mike Aley	Orcas Island
X	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
X	David Dubbell	San Juan Island
	Lance Evans	Orcas Island
	Tony Ghazel	Orcas Island
X	Wally Gudgell	Orcas Island
	John Hess	San Juan Island
	Deborah Hopkins	San Juan Island
X	Clark Johnson	Lopez Island
	Gordon Jonasson	Lopez Island
	Mark Lione	Anacortes
X	John MacLeod	Orcas Island
X	Pat McKay	San Juan Island
X	Bill Pike	Mount Vernon

	John Poletti	Orcas Island
	Howie Rosenfeld	San Juan Island
X	Margot Shaw	Orcas Island
X	Jamie Stephens	Lopez Island
	Mike Stolmeier	Orcas Island
X	Terresa Sundstrom	San Juan Island
X	Sally Thomsen	San Juan Island
X	Larry Vandermay	Orcas Island
X	John Whetten	Lopez Island
X	Susan Young	Lopez Island
	Beverly Zapalac	Lopez Island

Project Team

- David Moseley, WSDOT Assistant Secretary
- George Capacci, WSF Deputy Chief of Operations
- Marta Coursey, WSF Director of Communications
- Brian Churchwell, WSF Deputy Program Manager for Vehicle Reservations
- Deborah Young, WSF North Region Terminal Manager
- Leonard Smith, WSF Operations Manager
- Rachel Waitt, WSF Communications Staff