



## Ferries and the Bay Environment

By Naomi Lubick, Science Interchange Reporter

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You may have experienced the traffic that clogs up the highways of the Bay Area, particularly along Marin's Highway 101 corridor. In an effort to reduce that traffic, the California state legislature initiated the Bay Area Water Transit Authority in 1999. The group's objective is to expand ferry service throughout the Bay Area, pulling commuters off of highways and onto the water.

The initiation of expanded ferry service may be years away, but this month, the WTA took a first step toward making its recommendations to the legislature. Through Dec. 21, the WTA has been asking for input on how to conduct their first environmental impact report (EIR).

"The intent of the comment period is so that we are studying the things that people think we should be studying," said Steve Castleberry, manager of the system planning division of the WTA. Castleberry said in a telephone interview that the WTA wants to ensure that the environmental impact report is "the definitive fair and impartial technical study of Marin County sites."

Part of the controversy surrounding expanded ferry service involves the placement of terminals. Because of the interface of water and land, some sites, such as the site that could serve Novato and the North Bay at Port Sonoma/Gnoss Field, could be adversely affected by the dredging that would be necessary to allow ferries to pass.

"The perception is you can't build there because it's too environmentally damaging," Castleberry said of the North Bay site that is listed for investigation. "At this point, we're not disputing that, but we want to put science to that perception. I haven't been convinced from past work that those sites have fatal flaws or not. ...If there's a bad site, we want our studies to kill it definitively."

Legislation requires the WTA to compare ferry service to other alternatives, such as trains and buses, and Castleberry stressed that ridership studies will be an integral part of their first report. "A lot of things could make a ferry site not viable, such as impacts to wetlands, but the number one thing that will make it not a good site is if no one will ride that ferry to anywhere," he said.

Marin County studies have shown that the total number of rush-hour commuters to San Francisco makes up a very small percentage of total traffic along the corridor, around 8%. If the actual number of commuters is small, then getting their cars off the road may not be enough to counteract the emissions diesel-fueled ferries—or the other possible impacts of ferry transportation.

At a November "scoping meeting" in San Francisco, members of the Audubon Society spoke about the impact of dredging on migrating birds who stop to fuel up and even spend the winter in the mudflats of the area. Plus ferries create potential impacts to the bay with the waves they

create in passing, noise pollution, and other side effects that could harm the ecosystems of disappearing wetlands throughout the region.

Diesel emissions from ferries also are of high concern. In October, the Blue and Gold Fleet's "Oski" ferry started experimenting with soybean oil fuel. However, speakers at the meeting urged the WTA to make sure they look at the impacts of diesel fuel, as that is the cheapest option currently available and therefore feared to be the most likely for new ferries.

David Schonbrunn, president of the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund, said that the Port Sonoma/Gnoss Field site may have some pieces that make sense, but others that don't at all. "The impact on the existing agriculture there would be very high. A lot of land there is not presently protected," Schonbrunn said in a recent interview. He worries that if a ferry terminal were built there, the growth in southern Sonoma would increase, with unfortunate consequences. Schonbrunn and other environmentalists fear increased traffic, new parking lots that would take the place of wetlands and create polluting runoff, and mushrooming businesses that would spring up around a new ferry terminal, inflicting further damage on wetland ecosystems and migrating birds in the area.

Of the three general plans put forth as alternative ferry services, two contain the option of opening a terminal to serve Novato and the North Bay or expanding service to the existing Larkspur Landing terminal. No matter what the final decisions are regarding ferry service, the WTA will have to find ways to incorporate land routes (buses or trains) to serve the ferry terminals. "Legislation dictates that we look at the cost-effectiveness compared to other modes of travel," Castleberry said, such as bus services. Regionally sponsored land-based public transportation would have to be incorporated to serve an expanded ferry service, under the jurisdiction of local governments.

"We in the Bay Area have a really serious problem with driving on highways and congestion," Schonbrunn says. "Widening highways is not the answer. We need to start encouraging public transportation." He says the most obvious solution is to expand rail options for the North Bay. If ferry service is expanded, he would like to see rail service tied to the Larkspur Landing terminal, or even to San Quentin (though the option of the old prison as a terminal site is not very feasible, according to Castleberry).

However, the details of these issues may have to wait until the WTA's preliminary Bay Area environmental impact report is filed, along with the agency's recommendations to the legislature on how to proceed.

## RESOURCES

If you have any concerns or suggestions for the WTA's upcoming report, contact Steve Castleberry at the WTA in any of the following ways:

By Mail:

Mr. Steve Castleberry  
Manager, System Planning  
San Francisco Bay Area Water Transit Authority  
120 Broadway, San Francisco, CA 94111

By Fax:

(415) 291-3388

Attn: Steve Castleberry, San Francisco Bay Area Water Transit Authority

By E-Mail: [castleberry@watertransit.org](mailto:castleberry@watertransit.org)

For more information: [www.watertransit.org](http://www.watertransit.org)

For information on possible clean ferry solutions: [www.bluewaternetwork.org](http://www.bluewaternetwork.org)