

November 22, 2022

To: San Juan County Council

delivered via email to: compplancomments@sanjuanco.com

Subject: Comments on the San Juan County Comprehensive Plan Update, Map Amendments

Dear County Council Members,

Thank you for your ongoing efforts with respect to the Comprehensive Plan Update, and for considering these comments focused on the proposed Map Amendments to redesignate Forest Resource Lands to allow more intensive residential development.

I have been a year-round resident of Orcas Island for 17 years. During this time Forest Resource parcels have steadily been redesignated to allow for more intensive rural residential development. In my experience, no lands have ever been added to the Forest Resource designation to compensate for the Forest Resources lost. The Growth Management Act requires that county-wide studies of resource lands be done before any such redesignations are contemplated and, at a minimum, every time the Comprehensive Plan is updated.

The last analysis was published in December of 2017.

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“There were similar stakeholder comments on forest land as on agricultural land, and many stakeholders pointed to a need to better understand the off-site economic impacts of the preservation of forest land, even if not used for forestry. In other words, retailers, tour operators, lodging and hospitality establishments are all dependent on the preservation of forest lands for their businesses to thrive, since that quality of those forest lands draw visitors (and customers) to the islands. However, the economic impacts of those non-resource-related or non-

extractive businesses are not attributed, in whole or in part, to the forest lands. In this way, a focus on long-term commercial significance could allow the inherent logistical and economic difficulties in forestry and logging in San Juan County to lead to an erosion of protections for these lands. Encouraging and valuing the ecological stewardship of forest lands, as well as the ecological services that forests provide, was a central theme of stakeholder conversations.”

Ferry Limitations & Land Use Redesignations = Health & Climate Impacts

For the San Juan Islands, declining ferry services are more than an inconvenience. Many older residents, including myself, have increasing healthcare needs that cannot be addressed locally. For this significant segment of our community, ferry service to the mainland is truly an essential public service.

The Growth Management Act requires that essential public services, including transportation infrastructure, be adequate to accommodate projected growth. I know that previous County Councils have interpreted this requirement as applying only within San Juan County. This does not make sense for our island communities.

Redesignation of Forest Resource Lands to more intensive zoning designations leads to increased residential development that increases the demand for our limited ferry service.

Until ferry service is significantly improved, please do not increase the build-out potential in our islands. Retired ferry captain Ken Burtness, who serves on the Ferry Advisory Committee, has told me that this will take a minimum of ten years (he says that this is very optimistic).

The Seattle Times article, below, describes the perfect storm of factors that have impacted our ferry service. These problems will only get worse over time unless significant new sources of funding are found. Even after funds are secured, the process of sending out bids and building additional ferries takes years for each boat.

Ferry funding took a huge hit after passage of the Tim Eyman-sponsored Initiative 695 that limited car tab fees in 2000. The resulting reduction in funding severely impacted our Washington State Ferry system. Fare increases alone are not "the solution". Even with increased funding, the timeline for improvement is a

minimum of ten years. The scope of the work includes the replacement of aging ferries with new vessels and adequate provision of reserve ferries (that are called into service when a ferry requires major repairs).

The problems associated with insufficient crew numbers for the ferries will only be addressed by significantly increased funding of the ferries. Increased salaries and changes to on-call working requirements will be necessary to attract people to a career dedicated to working on our ferries.

How Are Ferry Capacity and Redesignation of Forest Resource Lands Connected?

Redesignation of Forest Resource Lands to Rural Farm Forest will ultimately add to the "build out" potential in our islands and therefore to the number of people using the ferries. In addition to a primary residence, guest house permits are available through the yearly lottery. Individual parcel owners will inevitably appeal to increase the density to one residence per five acres plus the potential guest house. And appeals will be granted because the prevailing attitude in our islands is that "just one more" development project will have minimal impacts.

Some landowners seek de-designation of Forest Resource Lands so that they can apply for short-term vacation rental permits. Short-term vacation rentals greatly increase the demand for ferry spaces.

The problem is that cumulative "just one more" impacts become truly significant. This is like Continental Drift. The rate of change is small each year, but over time, the magnitude of change is dramatic.

There are also environmental reasons to oppose redesignations that will increase the build-out potential in our islands. Reductions in our forest lands will take us in the opposite direction needed to address Climate Change. Trees remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and trees also help to recharge our groundwater supplies. Removal of trees and replacement of forests with the impervious surfaces that are part of residential development lead to increased stormwater flows that are expensive to mitigate. Mitigation of impacts never fully replaces the ecosystem services of the natural habitat that is destroyed. I can supply scientific articles that clearly demonstrate this "Myth of Mitigation".

Please do not redesignate Forest Resource Lands to Rural Farm Forest in the current Comprehensive Plan Update.

Janet Alderton

Orcas Island

https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/why-your-ferry-might-be-late-or-canceled-this-summer/?utm_source=marketingcloud&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Morning+Brief+7-7-2021+7+7+2021&utm_term=Active%20subscriber

Why your ferry might be late — or canceled — this summer

July 7, 2021

A shortage of boats and crew at Washington State Ferries is subjecting travelers to a summer of cancellations.

A high number of trips have already been canceled this year, according to WSF spokesperson Ian Sterling. Since February, at least 57 round-trip sailings have been called off due to staffing shortages. There were only 10 and five cancellations in the same time period respectively in 2019 and 2018.

As ridership is returning to pre-pandemic levels, passengers are starting to notice lapses in service, Sterling said. For an agency that typically completes [99% of its scheduled trips](#), those cancellations and travel alerts have been demoralizing for staff members, he said. Some trips were canceled in the San Juan Islands over the weekend, and the Bremerton-Seattle route Tuesday morning.

For every cancellation, Sterling said there are 10 more that were almost canceled. Dispatch scrambled and employees, scheduled to be off, volunteered to come in.

It's resulting in burnout among staff, said Jay Ubelhart, president of the Inlandboatmen's Union.

A crew shortage knocked the Port Townsend-Coupeville route to just one ferry at the height of touring season. Chief of Staff Nicole McIntosh blamed it on "an unprecedented staffing challenge" [in a personnel letter posted on all vessels](#) June 24.

While thanking crew for extraordinary work to keep boats moving in the pandemic, she urged them to answer last-minute calls to work. "We have an obligation to the taxpayers of the state to not miss sailings due to crewing. When

we do it lets down thousands of customers who trust and depend on us to get them safely to their destinations,” she wrote.

The agency reports nearly 300,000 riders during the holiday weekend. Saturday was the highest ridership day with nearly 86,000 riders, the most in a single day since Sept. 21, 2019, according to Sterling.

Though fleet size has improved since May, when WSF was short three boats, the usual summer fleet of 19 vessels is down to 18 after an engine fire this spring aboard the ferry Wenatchee will [keep that boat docked for months](#).

That’s barely manageable, because pandemic border restrictions have canceled service from Anacortes to Sidney, B.C., freeing up one boat for domestic trips.

Depending on the vessel and the number of passengers, the U.S. Coast Guard mandates a certain number of crew members before a boat can leave the dock.

Before 2012, crews operated with an extra member in case someone calls in sick, or has car trouble on the way to work, according to Sterling. To save money, ferries are now scheduled with the minimum number of crew members. One absent colleague can result in a canceled sailing — forcing passengers to wait for the next trip.

Washington State Ferries recommends travelers use its [travel and traffic guide](#), planning trips [early in the morning](#) or later at night and checking the [travel alerts bulletin](#) for schedule changes. If there is a long wait, WSF also suggests driving to another route without a delay.

Difficulties recruiting

The maritime industry in general struggles with recruiting young adults. But that has especially slowed during the pandemic for WSF, which faces a coming wave of retirements.

Working on a ferry is “a total shock to the system” compared to a typical 9-to-5 office job, said Ubelhart, who has worked on the state’s ferries for 20 years. To even apply for the most junior position, people must complete at least 14 days of training and often pay up to \$400 out of pocket, he said.

Work schedules are unpredictable both on a day-to-day and season-to-season basis, especially for new employees without seniority or a steady shift, he said.

New employees usually start out on call, and wait for a dispatcher to call with work.

“They’ll call you any time and you’re expected to jump into your uniform, grab a lunch and go to work,” Ubelhart said.

While working for WSF offers an upward career trajectory and a pension, Sterling said the agency has a hard time attracting young adults when competing with Seattle tech companies and the changing nature of work.

During the pandemic, Kitsap County resident Elliott Smith quit his office job to complete maritime training, with an eye toward work on a ferry. Instead, he began this summer working on a cargo ship in Beaumont, Texas.

Among other reasons, Smith was unwilling to spend at least two years on call, where he might be told to drive to any ferry terminal on any given day, or maybe not work at all.

“I would be applying for Washington State Ferries today, if I knew I could get a steady paycheck, but I’m not going to gamble for two years,” Smith said.

Wages also have not kept up with Seattle’s rising cost of living, said Ryan Brazeau, a fourth-generation ferry worker and officer in the Inlandboatmen’s Union. Tech has taken over the downtown area and people are unwilling to make long commutes to work for WSF, he said.

“This career is not built for a family either,” he said. “During this year COVID is taking a toll on people that have kids.”

As a taxpayer and Puget Sound-area native, Smith said it bothers him that the ferry logistics seem so disorganized. “We buy these multimillion-dollar boats, we keep them in shape, then we can’t run them because we don’t have enough people,” Smith said by phone from Texas last month.

Coming retirements and open positions

Since July 2019, 29 mates and captains have retired and 75 seamen have left, according to WSF. While the agency says it has managed to recruit enough seamen, they are still short about 10 senior deck crew.

The most recent breaking point has been the engine room, where around 34 employees have left, according to WSF. But a new class of about seven oilers is about to graduate, Sterling said, taking some pressure off the engine room staffs.

The agency is also anticipating more retirements. At least half the remaining senior engineers and deck crew are eligible for retirement, he said.

WSF couldn't afford to build new boats for a decade, due to fallout from a car-tab cut in 2000. New taxes since the mid-2010s are replenishing the budget. The next boat, a 144-car hybrid electric-diesel vessel, will [begin construction soon at Vigor in Seattle](#), but won't sail until 2024. The existing fleet is working past retirement age, and three vessels are at least 60 years old.

"Any time a ferry goes down, it shuts the whole system," Brazeau said.

Ferry careers

Ordinary seaman: Responsible for cleaning, first aid, firefighting, lookout. Requires 13 days training. Average pay, \$22.56/hour.

Able-bodied seaman: Responsible for vehicle loading, lifeboats, knot tying, assisting mates/captains. Requires two years experience, nine days of school. \$31.85/hour.

Mate: Shares navigation with captain, supervises vehicle loading, crowd management. Requires four years sea time, 33 days of officer school, 163 days of pilotage, study, training. \$44.62/hour.

Captain: Full command of vessel and passenger safety. Requires five to six years sea time, 35 days study, Coast Guard master's license. \$55.27/hour.

Oilers: Responsible for inspection of all systems, operating equipment, repair fixtures, mechanical and electrical aide for repairs. Requires 14 days of training. Average pay \$28.49/hour.

Assistant engineers: Responsible for running, operation and maintenance of the propulsion and electrical systems aboard the vessels. Average pay \$42.74/hour.

Chief engineers: Responsible for implementing all federal and state regulations, WSF policies and procedures, and any directives from WSF management. Average pay \$50.73/ hour.

Staff chief engineer: Responsible for all standard maintenance on the vessel, reviews and approves all maintenance recommendations for improvements on the vessel. Average pay \$66.77/hour.