

## **San Juan Journal / The Islands' Sounder**

### **Regional transportation summit today in Friday Harbor**

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**By Margie Doyle**

A summit today at the San Juan County Fairgrounds brings the issue of transportation front and center to islanders.

The Transportation Summit promises to be “a dialogue among citizens, policy makers and transportation providers to explore economically and environmentally sustainable multimodal transportation solutions for San Juan County,” according to organizers.

Summit organizers have arranged for local transit providers to provide free shuttle service to the ferries and from Friday Harbor to the fairgrounds.

Orcas Island Shuttle will pick up summit participants at the Outlook Inn in Eastsound at 7 a.m., and will return them from the 5:35 p.m. ferry leaving Friday Harbor.

Friendly Isle Charter on Lopez Island will provide a similar shuttle service.

San Juan Transit will run free shuttles from Friday Harbor to the fairgrounds on Sept. 17.

One of the issues that will be discussed at the summit: Regular, year-round passenger ferry service between Friday Harbor and Bellingham.

Friday Harbor Port Commissioner Greg Hertel, who has been working on establishing a service, would like to have it up and running by summer 2009. There would be four runs each day: early morning, mid-morning, early afternoon and late afternoon. Ferry passengers could take their bicycles and could ride Whatcom County transit at no additional charge.

Advocates for passenger ferry service between Friday Harbor and Bellingham say such a service would provide islanders with another venue for air travel, health care, school and mainland shopping.

Here's the kicker: Islanders could leave their cars at home. The passenger ferry would dock in Fairhaven, a hub location for Amtrak, buses, rental cars, and shuttles to Bellingham Airport.

Likewise, mainland travelers to Friday Harbor could leave their cars at the so-called intermodal station in Fairhaven. Advocates say that would relieve traffic congestion on island streets.

Hertel and Friday Harbor Town Councilwoman Liz Illg, who helped coordinate the summit, said a trial passenger ferry service in winter 2005-06 generated about 42 passengers a day — in the slow season, without advertising. Of those passengers, one-third took the passenger ferry to visit relatives in Whatcom County, Hertel and Illg said.

The summit will conclude with a meeting of the State Transportation Commission to discuss long-term ferry funding and the customer survey with Commission Chairman Dan O'Neal and Bob Distler, commission member from Orcas Island.

The next day, Sept. 18, the Transportation Commission will conduct a special meeting from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., in the Council Hearing Room at 55 Second St., Friday Harbor. The San Juan County Council and Ferry Advisory Committee will participate from 10 to 11 a.m.

“Transportation is such a critical element to our economic well-being on the islands, being that we are geographically disconnected,” said Bill Watson, program coordinator of the San Juan County Economic Development Council, one of the three main sponsors of the Transportation Summit.

“The summit will explore what vehicles are economically viable and the challenges existing businesses face.

“Look at all the commercial traffic that comes across the ferries — if they’re 10 minutes late for the boat they might get here three hours later. Most business is island centric as a result of (the difficulties of inter-island traffic).”

The San Juan County Economic Development Council is a non-profit corporation recognized by the state of Washington as the associate development organization for San Juan County.

The other main sponsors are the Port of Friday Harbor and Cascadia Center for Regional Development, involved in regional transportation and sustainable development issues “in the Cascadia Corridor, Puget Sound and in the U.S.-Canadian cross-border realm,” according to the center’s Web site.

Cascadia promotes U.S. efforts to reduce reliance on foreign oil, including the earliest possible development and integration of flex-fuel, plug-in, hybrid-electric vehicles.

Watson said the regional participation in the Transportation Summit has been planned for about six months as an “opportunity to bring the community together to lay the foundation of community input.”

Summit partner sponsors are the Town of Friday Harbor, San Juan Island Library, San Juan County, San Juan County Visitors Bureau, Orcas Island Chamber of Commerce and San Juan Island Chamber of Commerce

Service sponsors are Anne Sheridan Photography & Design, Friendly Isle Charters, Orcas Island Shuttle, Rock Island Technology Solutions, San Juan Transit, SanJuanIslandsTV.com, and San Juan Public Access Media.

Presenters from throughout the Northwest will share their thoughts about multi-modal approaches to the transportation needs of residents and visitors to the San Juan Islands. Presenters include state Transportation Department staff members, Washington State Transportation Commission members, Ferry Advisory Committee members, County Council members and policy leaders, who will meet with the public in informal “World Café” conversations.

The principles driving the meeting are:

— Transportation is the No. 1 issue impacting the economic sustainability of San Juan County’s communities and businesses and the everyday quality of life of residents.

— The role of intermodal transportation in reducing pollution and congestion will be largely determined by public policy at several levels of government and partnerships among various public agencies, private providers and the citizens of San Juan County.

The schedule includes a choice among two “conversations” in the morning between 10 and 11:30 a.m., two “conversations” in the afternoon from 12:30 to 2 p.m., two “conversations between 2:15 to 3:45 p.m., with the closing conversation with the State Transportation Commission on “Long Term Ferry Funding and Customer Surveys” between 4 and 5 p.m.

10-11:30 a.m.

— Conversation 1: “Car-free Travel To and From the County.”

This talk will feature a member of the North Sound Connecting Communities Project, aka “the Farmhouse Gang,” a regional transportation planning group made up of representatives from cities, counties, port districts, transit

agencies, railroads, bus, and other transportation modalities. The group has been around quite a few years, said Watson, meeting at the Farmhouse Restaurant off Highway 20 between Burlington and Anacortes.

— Conversation 2: “Community Transit: What Does It Take?”

12:30-2 p.m.

— Conversation 3: “On Foot and On Bikes in San Juan County.”

— Conversation 4: “Passenger Ferries — Can We Make Them Work for Us?”

2:15-3:45 p.m.

— Conversation 5: “Tourism Transportation Management: From the Newest Scenic Byway to the 2010 Olympics.”

— Conversation 6: “Inter-island and Regional Freight Mobility.”

4-5 p.m.

— “Long Term Ferry Funding and Customer Surveys.”

Throughout the day, exhibitors will be on hand in the Main Building of the fairgrounds to display a wide variety of transportation resources, including electric vehicles, scooters, trails programs, airlines, sjRideshare programs. Exhibitors can sign up at no charge.

“I would hope we get a real good turnout,” Ferry Advisory Committee Chairman Ed Sutton said of the summit and the Transportation Commission meeting.

“This is about more than the ferries, but covers transportation topics on a broader scale. The county has to get much more involved in discussing transportation and this is a really healthy discussion. Whether it’s free parking on the Fourth of July weekend or alternatives to gas-powered vehicles, we have to discuss solutions, and the transportation summit is a great start.

“The second step is the meeting aboard the inter-island ferry on Oct. 6. It’s really important for people to participate, because their input goes to the Transportation Commission for final consideration before the next legislation session.”

For more information, visit [www.islandway.org/transummit](http://www.islandway.org/transummit); e-mail [transummit@islandway.org](mailto:transummit@islandway.org); or call Bill Watson, San Juan County Economic Development Council, 378-2906.