



DATE: February 11, 2009

TO: Board of Park Commissioners

FROM: Paula Hoff, Strategic Advisor

SUBJECT: Seacrest Water Taxi Proposal for Year-round Service and Dock Improvements

Requested Board Action

Staff is requesting a recommendation to approve a change of use at Seacrest Park, allowing the Elliott Bay Water Taxi, which operates from the Seacrest dock, to provide year-round service. It currently operates April through October. There will be a public hearing at the March 12, 2009 Park Board meeting with a discussion and recommendation to follow on March 26. This is considered a change of use for Seacrest Park; and the Parks Public Involvement Policy calls for the Board of Park Commissioners to review and make a recommendation on this issue.

Staff Recommendation

Staff is asking for a recommendation of approval for the change of use from a temporary seasonal operation of the Elliott Bay Water Taxi at Seacrest Park to a temporary year-round operation beginning in 2010. This service will run until a permanent site can be secured.

Project or Policy Description and Background

The King County Ferry District was formed by the King County Council in April 2007 to continue operation of the Vashon passenger ferry, take over the Elliott Bay Water Taxi service from Metro, and establish up to five demonstration passenger ferry routes elsewhere in King County

In 2008 the Ferry District took over operation of the water taxi. A record 182,000 riders used the water taxi, a 13 percent increase in ridership over the previous year. Since 2005, water taxi use has increased 70 percent. The first big change proposed by the Ferry District is to extend the water taxi to year-round operation in 2010. The Ferry District's proposal includes replacement of the existing floating dock with a new one with a slightly different configuration. The new floating dock enables year-round operation.

Parks and Recreation has been allowing temporary seasonal Elliott Bay Water Taxi service for 11 years. As a public agency, the King County Ferry District (and previously King County Metro when it operated the water taxi) provides a creative public benefit for Puget Sound residents by offering an alternative public transportation option. Until a permanent location is identified in West Seattle for the water taxi, Seacrest is the only viable spot to accommodate this service.

In addition to facilitating year-round ferry service, the new dock replacement at Seacrest will enhance recreational use of the Seacrest facility in the following ways:

- A wider, longer gangway improves two-way access, particularly for people with disabilities;
- New concrete floats provide stability and should reduce the potential for slips and falls;
- A change in orientation of water taxi docking moves the water taxi further from the scuba dive area; and
- The improved float provides easier access for kayakers and other small boats and reduces shadowing of the near-shore area.

This project fits into the Parks and Recreation Strategic Action Plan by fostering effective partnerships: Goal 1 E calls for developing and maintaining partnerships to enhance Seattle's parks and open spaces. Partnership with the Ferry District provides a popular public transportation alternative, while providing a much needed dock replacement and an improved facility for recreational activities.

Public Involvement Process

Seattle Parks and Recreation, the King County Ferry District and the King County Marine Division held an open house on January 15, 2009 in West Seattle to gather public input on plans for year-round water taxi service, including replacement of the dock at Seacrest Park. The meeting was advertised in all of the local papers, on our website, on the Ferry District's website, on the West Seattle Blog, through notice posted at the Alki Community Center and at Seacrest. In addition, targeted e-mails and mailings went to known affected user groups (scuba divers, Tengu fishing club, other fishing activists as well as other identified recreational users), West Seattle residents involved in previous park projects and neighbors within a mile-plus radius of the site. Over 80 citizens attended the open house at the Alki Community Center and the comments were overwhelmingly supportive of the proposal. The next step in the public process is the Park Board public hearing on March 12.

Issues

Parking – Parking is a concern for some residents along Alki. There were requests for:

- Stronger enforcement of parking hours at Seacrest Park and along Alki;
- An area for divers to drop off their equipment so they don't have to take up parking spaces;
- The addition of angled street parking;
- Increased shuttle service; and
- Improved parking options.

Since the winter months tend to be much quieter at Seacrest Park and Alki in general, we aren't expecting any substantial increase in parking issues because of the addition of year-round service.

Transportation use of a Park site - There have been questions raised as to whether operating a water taxi service from a park is a recreational use. Staff feels strongly that enhancing public transportation options is part of our mission of environmental stewardship, and that the positive benefits of operating the water taxi at Seacrest outweigh the concerns. The planned improvements do not preclude or displace any of the activities currently at the park. In fact, we expect these improvements will enhance access for all park users.

Diver Safety - Some divers would like to see mitigation at the park for increasing water taxi service at the site. They have always had safety concerns about the shared use at this site, but we are anticipating that the improved dock configuration will be much safer for the divers as it moves the water taxi boat further from the diving area. A group of divers is going to work with King County Councilmember Dow Constantine on assistance in providing some amenities for divers at the site. In the past few years, a diver shower and safety buoys have been added as mitigation at Seacrest.

Recreation Conservation Office Concerns (RCO) – The RCO, which allocated some grant funding to the Seacrest project over 20 years ago, raised concerns about the plan to use Seacrest for year-round operation, as they felt it constituted a commercial use. The King County Ferry District is a public agency providing a transportation option that encourages people to use public transportation instead of single-occupancy vehicles and helps further our mission to preserve our environment.

Environmental Sustainability

Part of Seattle Parks and Recreation's mission is environmental stewardship. Providing a facility for operating the water taxi encourages people to use public transportation instead of single-occupancy vehicles, one of the biggest steps we can take to preserve our environment for generations to come.

Budget

Funding for this project will come from the King County Ferry District. We have not identified any budget implications for the City of Seattle.

Schedule

The Ferry District expects to have final design by the end of June. This would allow them to go out to bid in July, award a contract in September, have the dock and gangway constructed by December and installed before the end of the year. All of this is contingent on getting the appropriate approvals from the various jurisdictions. Year-round Elliott Bay Water Taxi service would begin sometime in 2010.

Additional Information

Information on the proposed design can be found at <http://www.kingcountyferrydistrict.org/>

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