

Extra money slated for future ferry service to Antioch, Martinez and Hercules

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ContraCostaTimes.com

SAN FRANCISCO -- Plans to bring ferry service from San Francisco Bay to three Contra Costa downtowns recently received a sizable financial boost.

The Water Emergency Transportation Authority will provide Antioch, Hercules and Martinez with \$27 million in capital funding over the next decade -- part of \$422 million earmarked for Bay Area ferry system improvements. That amount, approved earlier this month, is a far cry from the nearly \$2 million set aside in earlier versions of the 10-year plan, drawing the ire of Antioch, East Contra Costa and county leaders, including state Sen. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord. Antioch officials originally estimated the nearly \$750,000 it was slated to receive for environmental studies would rule out development until at least 2021.

"We're excited about it. We feel like they listened to us," said Antioch Mayor Wade Harper, crediting DeSaulnier for bringing concerned parties together. "I think it makes the (ferry prospects) more realistic."

DeSaulnier, who heads the Senate's transportation committee, requested a meeting with WETA, county transportation officials and the cities after the initial proposal raised concerns.

In an October letter to the agency, he said WETA had lost sight of its mandate to provide emergency services, as evidenced by the "apparent indifference" with which it treated Contra Costa cities.

"One is left with the impression that the Bay Area transit corridor does not stretch beyond Interstate 80," he wrote.

DeSaulnier said last week he was encouraged by the progress and increased communication.

"To be fair to the WETA board, this all started before the recession. Like any other agency, they have to worry about money," he said. "Also, moving away from the urban corridor creates that many more challenges."

"Having said all that, if we don't start planning for services coming out to Contra Costa now, then that means it's that much farther away."

An additional \$25 million was later included as a "placeholder," said Nina Rannells, WETA's executive director. That money, which would come from Proposition 1B, depends on creation of a sustainable funding plan by stakeholders for construction and long-term operations.

The biggest hurdle Antioch, Martinez and Hercules face in moving forward is ensuring adequate ridership, or "fare box recovery," said Victor Carniglia, an Antioch consultant.

Projected ridership in the plan for Antioch, Martinez and Hercules is 445, 614 and 565 riders per day, respectively -- far less than other planned sites, including Richmond and Berkeley.

"It was our way of showing that we are working with the cities and will continue to work with cities," Rannells said. "But we have a long way to go. A lot of money will still need to be secured."

New terminals can cost anywhere from \$10 million to \$50 million, while operations could cost millions more, she said.

Work continues in Antioch on potential site locations and design for a new ferry terminal. That report will be presented at a city meeting next month.

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