

Martinez ferry service still far off on the horizon

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MARTINEZ -- City leaders cheered the regional ferry agency's recent decision to set aside funds to build a terminal in Martinez, but the project will need a lot more money before Contra Costa commuters can ditch the gridlocked highways for the open water.

In January, the Water Emergency Transportation Authority approved \$25 million in capital funding for Martinez, Antioch and Hercules as part of its 10-year plan to expand and maintain the Bay Area's ferry system.

WETA also has earmarked \$500,000 for an environmental study of the two proposed Martinez ferry terminal sites and \$250,000 for conceptual design work.

But state-of-the-art ferry terminals aren't cheap -- the new South San Francisco terminal cost \$25 million -- so the capital funds won't cover the cost of building one in each of the three Contra Costa County cities.

In addition to securing additional capital funds, Martinez also must develop a sustainable plan to cover the ongoing costs of operating ferry service. Other obstacles include the need for regular dredging and the Martinez terminal's half-mile distance from downtown.

"Even the easiest ferry project has challenges so I wouldn't necessarily be pessimistic. I just think there's a lot of work to do and the most work to do is on the funding," said Kevin Connolly, WETA manager of planning and development.

Like most public transportation systems, fares cover only a fraction of the ferry service's operating costs. For the entire Bay Area ferry system, which includes the Vallejo, Alameda Harbor Bay, Alameda/Oakland and South San Francisco lines, fares covered nearly 49 percent of operating costs in fiscal year 2010-11, according to WETA.

WETA requires that commuter services generate enough fares to pay at least 40 percent of costs. The city must subsidize the remaining 60 percent with bridge tolls, sales tax or other revenue. New ferry services have three years to reach this target.

The Contra Costa Transportation Authority has committed \$45 million for the Hercules and Richmond ferry services from funds collected through Measure J, the countywide half-cent sales tax that pays for transportation projects. Since Martinez didn't request Measure J funds for a ferry, city leaders hope a county transportation measure could be a funding source should voters approve one in the future.

The original Martinez ferry ridership estimate of 1,200 trips per day by 2025 inexplicably assumed the service would draw passengers from Benicia. By restricting the likely passenger pool to central Contra Costa County and factoring in demographic trends, the current weekday ridership estimate is 614 round trips per day by 2035. Although the Martinez figure is higher than Hercules and Antioch -- 565 and 445, respectively -- it doesn't compare with the 1,715 projected round trips for the planned Richmond ferry.

The county transportation authority is drafting a report that will include ridership data, projected operating costs and an analysis of potential terminal sites for Martinez, Hercules and Antioch.

"We're hoping the white paper will lay out a potential path for which terminals make the sense to move forward on first," said Peter Engel, program manager.

Once the report is complete, WETA will enter into an agreement with Martinez on a sustainable funding plan and a site, Connolly said. The environmental study will follow, which could take up to two years.

City leaders hope WETA will consider building the terminal at the marina, which Martinez has struggled for years to renovate and turn into a thriving, profitable enterprise.

"Maybe it's one way to really help our marina out and solve some of these financial issues," Mayor Rob Schroder said recently.

WETA's Connolly, however, flatly ruled out the marina as a ferry terminal location. That authority's large "water jet boats" create too much turbulence to enter a marina, and the propeller boats would double the 57-minute travel time to San Francisco, he said. And then there's the dilapidated condition of the marina.

"There are a variety of reasons why the marina doesn't work, but it boils down to safety and operations," Connolly said.

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