

Frog Ferry river commute pilot program revealed

Joseph Gallivan | June 08 2021

Come back in 2022 for a seat from St Johns to downtown Portland in 25 minutes; other stops to follow.



COURTESY: ALL AMERICAN MARINE - Portland needs low draft ferries to get under the Steel Bridge because Willamette River levels vary by 26 feet over the year.

The nonprofit Friends of Frog Ferry's \$9.4 million, two-year pilot will feature low slung diesel boats plying their trade from the Cathedral Park boat ramp in St. Johns to Salmon Street Springs on Portland's Tom McCall Waterfront Park.

The test project will run on grant money and be used to gather data about everything from engine size to commuters' seating preferences. The 24-month pilot project will launch in Summer/Fall 2022 and run through Summer 2024.

Backers explained the project at a news conference next to the Cathedral Park boat ramp, usually used by fishing boats and leisure craft, on Tuesday, June 8.

Friends of Frog Ferry revealed other stops the boat may make along the route in future. The total of nine are: Vancouver's new waterfront, St Johns, Oregon Convention Center/Kevin Duckworth pier (near east Burnside St), Salmon Street, Riverplace, OMSI, Milwaukie, Lake Oswego and Oregon City.

The pilot will cost \$9.4 million, including designing and building the first boat and preparing docks.

The nonprofit cannot apply for grants from the Federal Transportation Authority, but the City of Portland can, and the City has partnered with them. The City is applying for \$3.3 million of federal funding. The Oregon Department of Transportation is also on board to the tune of \$500,000 grant, funded by the state transit tax.



PMG: JOSEPH GALLIVAN - Ron Wille, the President and COO of All American Marine of Bellingham, Washington, shows off a design for a passenger ferry along the Willamette River. A pilot program will run from 2022 to 2024. Friends Frog Ferry founder Susan Bladholm (left) looks on.

The pilot will begin with one vessel holding about 70 passengers. The design will accommodate bikes, wheelchairs, and have comfortable indoor seating with concessions and TV screens. On weekdays it will just serve St. Johns and downtown Portland, but Frog Ferry founder Susan Bladholm (of Cycle Oregon fame), said it will be flexible and try out new times and destinations, especially on weekends.

Bladholm added that tickets during the pilot period will be affordable to encourage participation: \$3 one way for adults, \$2 for honored citizens and free for minors.

Research has shown that the St. Johns neighborhood has 300 people who work at OHSU and 300 staff and students at Portland State University who might like a scenic boat ride downtown. TriMet has told them that it can't handle the steep slope down to the boat ramp so some sort of trolley service may be needed to connect to North Lombard Street.

Friends of Frog Ferry is selling the concept as green (1,000 passengers a day would cut out 600 cars trips), as an equity play (cheap transit) and as economic development (encouraging tourism). The group said that Portland is missing out because it is the only waterfront city, after Milwaukee Wisconsin, without a passenger ferry.

The company expects to have seven boats by 2026.

"The overall project cost for the pilot project is \$9 million and for the full seven vessel, nine stop ferry service, out there in the future, will be \$40 million," Bladholm said.



COURTESY GRAPHIC: FRIENDS OF FROG FERRY/CONVERGENCE ARCHITECTURE - How a modern Portland ferry might look, with carpets, AC and ultra hi-def TVs.

Later she told the Portland Tribune that there will be no fruitless queuing for ferries that are already full of Vancouverites. All ticketing will be done by mobile app.

"In Brisbane you scan your phone and you just keep walking. I was in Oslo, Norway right before COVID, watching people and they're literally swinging off their bikes and walking onto the ferry. That just-in-time (delivery). We don't want people queuing up. We certainly don't want people left behind on the docks."

Ron Wille, the President and COO of All American Marine, was down from Bellingham, Washington, to pitch. His company will bid to build the first ferry, along with its design partner Teknicraft in Auckland, New Zealand.

"When will depend on how quickly the FTA fundings come through, and how quickly they can turn that around."

His company specializes in diesel-electric hybrid ferries, such as the 600 passenger Hydra in San Francisco Bay. The first Frog Ferry boat will probably be diesel, but can be converted to electric later. The full route would need charging stations. Smaller boats would work downriver, bigger, express boats would serve Vancouver.

The newer ferries — especially those that don't carry vehicles — are nicer than they used to be. They have carpet, comfortable seating areas and places to work. But Wille pointed out many people prefer to look out of the window. "You will hear from folks that ride passenger only ferries, anywhere around the world, they really enjoy the trip to work. It's a quality of life enhancement. Instead of spending an hour in the car, you just sit down at a table or a chair, and you're zipping along the waterfront. In numerous studies people say riding on the ferry to get back and forth to work has improved the quality of the life."

More: frogferry.com