

The Seattle Times

Wednesday, November 11, 2009 - Page updated at 12:42 AM

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County foot-ferry routes cut; money may go to buses

By Susan Gilmore

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King County has reduced its property taxes for next year by eliminating five demonstration routes for a county ferry system.

The King County Ferry District board voted Monday to limit the district to just two routes, the Vashon Island ferry and the West Seattle water taxi.

Originally, when the county got into the foot-ferry business two years ago, it planned to operate Vashon and West Seattle, as well as five demonstration routes: Kirkland, South Puget Sound, Kenmore, Shilshole and Renton.

The new rate lowers the county property tax to \$1.18 million, or one third of one cent per \$1,000 assessed valuation. The new rate would be \$1.20 per year for a \$400,000 home.

The original rate, set in 2007, was 5.5 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation, or about \$22 a year.

The cut, however, gives the county the option of helping pay for bus service by raising property taxes the same amount as it lowered the ferry levy without taxpayers noticing any difference in their taxes.

"In light of tight economic times and the transit crisis King County is facing, we hope that these savings will allow us to preserve bus service," said councilwoman Jane Hague, sponsor of the ferry proposal. She said the savings by eliminating the ferry demonstration routes could translate into more than 180,000 hours of bus service.

The county's move to take over ferries was prodded by the Legislature, which in 2005 said the state wouldn't continue to pay for Vashon service.

The Legislature six years ago gave counties the right to create ferry districts without a public vote and to impose a property tax of up to 75 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

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