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## County steps in to keep ferry riders connected

In Washington, ferry runs have been considered extensions of state highways, with taxpayers statewide contributing to their operations as if the runs were roads in the state's far-flung corners.

As of Tuesday, however, the Vashon-Seattle run became the equivalent of a county road — which provides some stability to a service the state has been trying to unload for more than five years. Users of the Seattle-Vashon foot ferries — threatened with oblivion — can rest a little easier now that King County has taken over responsibility.

Instead of voters statewide subsidizing the Vashon-Seattle runs, residents in a newly created countywide ferry district will be paying more in property taxes — about \$22 annually for a \$400,000 home — for the service. For the next year, King County will pay the state to serve the route with state boats and crews. Next year, it intends to have boats and crews to replace state service.

King County also plans to expand the seasonal West Seattle water taxi service year-round by 2010 and discern demand for other so-called "demonstration" routes. That could include a revival of the ferry service that served Lake Washington until 1950 — a decade after the lake's first bridge was built — something that could come in handy with plans to replace the Highway 520 bridge — and possibly alleviate traffic going across both bridges. Another possibility is a run to Shilshole Bay, which, with the West Seattle water taxi, could help once a solution to the Alaskan Way Viaduct is settled upon and implemented.

King County makes this move at a difficult time — just as fuel prices are soaring to unprecedented levels. But it is the right thing to do. Getting into the ferry business ensures an important community remains linked to Seattle and could help solve the larger and growing problem of traffic congestion by exploring alternatives to road-clogging automobile traffic.

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GREG GILBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Ken Balcomb, left, and Mark Sears get a close-up view of the two-year old baby orca that is roaming the shoreline near the Vashon ferry dock. Baby Orca