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Popular water taxi could run year-round

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P-I REPORTER

(Editor's note: This story has been changed since it was originally published. King County is expected to impose a property tax of 2 to 3 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation to finance passenger-only ferry service. The amount of the tax was misstated in the original version.)

Finished with his work day downtown, Lloyd McIsaac geared up for his commute home to West Seattle -- by relaxing in the late afternoon sun on Pier 55, waiting for his departure time. McIsaac, a district manager for Tully's Coffee, prefers to make the trip aboard the Elliott Bay Water Taxi, a waterborne shuttle service operated by King County Metro transit.

"It saves on gas, saves on parking, it makes my life easier," he said.

Once aboard the Sightseer, the 64-foot boat operated by Argosy Cruises under contract to Metro, McIsaac zips across Puget Sound to Seacrest Park in 12 minutes, then walks to his house.

"It's a relaxing, nice little trip," he said. "It's better than fighting the traffic on the bridge."

When he does drive to work over the West Seattle Bridge -- the water taxi operates only from May through September -- it can take 45 minutes, he said. The boat ride costs \$3 each way, but regular passengers like McIsaac can save by buying a Metro pass that covers a month of trips for \$27.

For Kathryn Warma, who lives near Admiral Junction in West Seattle and works as a federal prosecutor downtown, the passenger-only ferry is more than mere transportation.

"It's a fantastic way to start the day: on the water," she said, taking in the sun, the breeze and the panoramic view of the Seattle skyline, the Space Needle and Mount Rainier from the open upper deck of the Sightseer.

Sometimes she sees sea lions hanging around a buoy, or a bald eagle soaring overhead.

"It's very relaxing, beautiful, inspirational," she said.

Warma takes advantage of the free Metro shuttle bus that connects the water taxi dock at Seacrest Park in Alki with the Admiral district (and also with the Alaska Junction and Alki Point). So does Scott Miller, who rides his bike down the hill from Admiral to the dock in the morning, then stows the bike on the water taxi and the shuttle bus for the commute home.

"It's the ultimate lazy man's choice," he said.

Miller completes his commute by biking between Pier 55 and his job in public relations near Myrtle Edwards Park. His employer pays for his Metro pass. When the ferry isn't running, he drives to work, which takes less time door to door but costs him \$7 a day for parking, plus gas.

"It's a huge improvement in the commute when they start the water taxi again," he said. "It's just a real head-clearing way to start the day."

McIsaac, Warma and Miller are part of a growing number of commuters opting to cruise to their jobs on the water taxi. Shoppers, tourists, children on nursery-school trips and other travelers ride the 149-passenger boat, too. The water taxi, which started in 1997, set a record last year with more than 122,000 passenger trips in its May-September season.

And now, the county is considering expanding the service. The County Council last month approved creation of a countywide ferry taxing district to finance passenger-only routes. Besides looking at year-round operation of the water taxi, the district is expected to study improvements to foot ferry service between West Seattle and Vashon Island and to test a Lake Washington water taxi running between Kirkland and the University of Washington.

The council is expected to impose a property tax of 2 to 3 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation for the ferries, costing the owner of a home assessed at \$400,000 from \$8 to \$12 a year. The tax money would make up the difference between the revenue provided by fares and the cost of operating the ferry service, including any connecting shuttle buses.

In 2006, Metro spent \$386,474 on the water taxi while collecting \$171,102 in fares. The West Seattle shuttle buses cost the agency another \$185,808 to operate.

ONLINE

Find schedules and other information about the Elliott Bay Water Taxi at goto.seattlepi.com/r705.

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