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The Landscape: Ferries

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In recent years, a resurgence of interest in water-based mass transportation has led the City of Portland to reconsider the potential role of ferries in the regional transportation system. Not only do ferries present an attractive alternative for increasing water-crossing capacity for commuters, but they also are a link to the region’s past. Much of the metroscape’s early development was facilitated by ferry lines that allowed development to spread across the region.

The metroscape was once home to a thriving ferry industry. Starting in the 1840s, ferry lines developed on many rivers and streams. In addition to providing regular transportation, they also made land more accessible and attractive to investors, thus facilitating residential and commercial investment (Snyder, 1989). Ferries aided development of many cities and towns around the region in a similar fashion, including Portland, Oregon City, and Wilsonville.

Proliferation of the automobile, advances in building technology, and an increase in public infrastructure spending led to the decline of the ferry industry during the early 20th century. Many ferry lines were replaced with bridges, including the St. Johns and Sellwood bridges. Today only two regularly scheduled ferry lines operate in the metroscape: the Canby Ferry in Clackamas County and the Wheatland Ferry between Marion and Yamhill counties (http://www.w7wwg.com/ferries.htm).

In recent years, the idea of incorporating ferries into the regional transportation network has gained traction in Portland. Ferries are an appealing form of mass transit particularly for cyclists and pedestrians. Open air or windowed decks allow for a pleasant ride. In addition to practical considerations, ferries invoke nostalgia. Symbols of a bygone era, ferries are reminiscent of a time when rivers were more central to the lives of area residents.

When the City of Portland launched the River Renaissance program in 2000, with a vision of revitalizing the Willamette River and reuniting the city around a common element, ferries were incorporated in the plan. The City partnered with Nelson/Nygaard, Cogan Owens Cogan, and IBJ Associated to conduct a ferry feasibility study. The report, released in June 2006, looked at two possibilities for ferry service: a commuter line and an intra-city circulator that would connect important destinations within Portland’s Central City and provide river excursion trips for visitors and residents. The report concluded that “commuter ferry service should not be pursued at this time due to high cost premiums over other modal options and expensive terminal construction that would be required to initiate service.” Looking ahead, however, the report suggested that “a seasonal circulator designed to provide passenger excursions and connect Central City destinations during the peak visitor season (May through October) is the most cost-effective service evaluated and should be considered as an initial service offering” (Willamette River Ferry Feasibility Study, June 2006). In January 2009, the City announced that River Renaissance would be combined with the Office of Healthy Working Rivers. Its unclear how this collaboration will affect possible plans to incorporate ferries into the regional transportation system.

One unresolved question is environmental impact. A study of nine popular public transportation modes conducted in Hong Kong in 2001-2002 found that the volatile organic compound exposure levels in marine transport were lower than land based transport. A similar study in San Francisco found that diesel-powered ferries without emissions controls will produce less carbon monoxide but more particulate matter and nitrogen oxide per passenger-trip than typical land-based options like cars.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ferry</th>
<th>River</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Original Operator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheatland Ferry</td>
<td>Willamette</td>
<td>Champoeq on the south bank to the north bank</td>
<td>1850s - Present</td>
<td>Daniel Matheny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Laframboise Ferry</td>
<td>Willamette</td>
<td>Champoeg on the south bank to the north bank</td>
<td>1850-1857</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boones Ferry</td>
<td>Willamette</td>
<td>Wilsonville</td>
<td>1847-1954</td>
<td>Alphonso Boone (grandson of Daniel Boone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Johns Ferry</td>
<td>Willamette</td>
<td>St. Johns to Linnton</td>
<td>circa 1850-1931</td>
<td>James John</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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