Potential loss of Anacortes ferry ‘devastating to this community,’ mayor says

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By

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ANACORTES — The Elwha ferry will be retired from service if the Legislature cuts funding for it, a move that would impact the Anacortes to Sidney, British Columbia, route and further strain the Washington State Ferries (WSF) system.
Gov. Jay Inslee’s supplemental budget does not include funding to operate the 52-year-old Elwha, which is out of service and in need of repairs, said WSF spokesman Ian Sterling.

If the Elwha is retired, the only ferry certified to make the international crossing would be the Chelan.

Losing the Elwha would leave WSF with 21 boats in its fleet. Sterling said while the ferry system needs 19 to operate its summer routes, at least two ferries are out for maintenance at any given time, and breakdowns and incidents such as crab-pot entanglements take boats out of service.
He said the state has funded a new vessel — a hybrid-electric ferry — but it is not expected to be in service until 2023.

Anacortes Mayor Laurie Gere said in an emailed statement Wednesday that the state should continue to fund the Elwha until it builds new ferries.
“The reduction in service would be devastating to this community,” Gere said in the statement. “The (Anacortes-to-Sidney) international tourism route contributes to the multi-billion dollar tourism industry in our state. ... We believe the best path forward is to keep the international ferry route whole and work to fund building of new ferry vessels. It is short-sighted to reduce this self-supporting ferry route.”

Gere said the route generates an estimated $1.6 million in annual tax revenue for Anacortes, such as tax collected by hotels and motels.

A 2007 report prepared for the Economic Development Alliance of Skagit County found the Anacortes-to-Sidney ferry service directly and indirectly supported more than 1,400 jobs, $30 million in annual payroll and $126 million in annual spending in the Northern Puget Sound region.

“We’ve had (the run) for 99 years,” said Stephanie Hamilton, executive director of the Anacortes Chamber of Commerce. “It’s a great economic tie to the community.”

She said the chamber board passed a resolution Tuesday in support of strategies to save the Elwha ferry.

In 2019, about 116,000 people rode the Anacortes/Sidney route, according to WSF statistics.

Funding for transportation projects has been in jeopardy in light of Initiative 976 — the voter-approved measure that cut car-tab fees to $30 and is expected to lead to a loss of $1.9 billion over six years.

Sen. Liz Lovelett, D-Anacortes, said Tuesday it was difficult to find support among legislators for continuing to fund the Elwha.

“(The Elwha) is riddled with problems even after dumping money into it,” she said. “It was hard to figure out a path forward to finance keeping a nearly 60-year-old boat going at this point.”
Lovelett said her focus is on maintaining service on the Anacortes/Sidney and Anacortes/San Juan Island routes, where the Elwha also operates.

“I’m putting my effort into making sure the schedule stays intact and continuing to have the same level of service,” she said.

Lovelett said she opposed a bill — which died in committee — that would have allowed a private ferry to operate between Anacortes and Sidney.

The only member of the public to speak in favor of the bill was David Gudgel, CEO of Clipper Vacations, which operates the Seattle to Victoria, B.C., ferry.

Lovelett said legislators from districts where ferries operate plan to meet next week to further discuss funding ferries.

Sterling said the Elwha recently underwent a $23 million upgrade to replace steel on its passenger deck. He said the ferry’s vehicle deck also has corroded steel, and WSF is looking into options to complete repairs in sections, if funding comes through.

“There is some light at the end of the tunnel,” he said. “We have a governor and Legislature that understand the importance of ferries — we are still able to build new boats. But we’re a couple years away from seeing a new vessel built again.”

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