

TORONTO TRANSIT COMMISSION REPORT NO.

MEETING DATE: November 26 2008

SUBJECT: COMMUTER FERRY SERVICE

ACTION ITEM

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Commission note that, as requested by the Commission, staff have investigated the feasibility of operating ferry boats along the waterfront for the purpose of providing east – west commuter service, and have concluded that this would not be a viable service. Highlights of this investigation are:

- Two possible routings for commuter ferries serving downtown Toronto were identified and assessed, one from Bluffer's Park in Scarborough, and one from Humber Bay in Etobicoke;
- There are high capital costs associated with introducing a commuter ferry service, and there are numerous issues that would need to be resolved related to the design and construction of ferry terminals and acceptable locations;
- Local demand for such a service (within a short transit trip of the proposed ferry terminal locations) would be modest because these areas are already well-served both by both GO Rail and local TTC service;
- The total travel time of a typical ferry trip would be much longer than the equivalent GO Rail trip and approximately the same as the time for the equivalent TTC trip.
- A ferry service would be subject to significant reliability issues related to non-summer weather conditions;
- Implementing one ferry route would require an initial investment of almost \$20 million and approximately \$6.5 million in annual operating costs. If two routes were to be implemented, these costs would double;
- GO Transit currently provides a faster, more-reliable commuter service along the Lakeshore corridor, with a fare of approximately \$3.50 per passenger, so it is unlikely that people would pay a significant fare premium for ferry service; and
- Based on preliminary estimates of potential ridership, and assuming current TTC fares, it is estimated that a Humber Bay ferry service would require a subsidy of \$11.50 per passenger-trip and the Scarborough-Bluffers Park service would require a subsidy of \$39 per customer trip.

FUNDING

This report has no effect on the TTC's operating or capital budgets.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting of July 11, 2007, the Commission requested that staff report on the feasibility of offering high-speed passenger ferry service as a means of expanding and improving transit service in Toronto. This report responds to that request.

DISCUSSION

TTC staff retained Dr. Richard Soberman, a well-known transportation expert and authority, to prepare an overview of the opportunities and potential for establishing fast ferry services in Toronto. His report is attached as Appendix 1.

The report reviews opportunities for ferry routes that could be considered to serve downtown Toronto, both from the east and the west, as illustrated in Exhibit 1. Possible routings to the downtown from each direction were selected to illustrate the opportunities and issues related to the concept, notably routings from the Humber Bay area in Etobicoke and from the Bluffer's Park area in Scarborough.

Ferry travel times are estimated to be 24 minutes between Humber Bay and the downtown, and 38 minutes between Bluffer's Park and downtown. Incorporating the access time required to reach the proposed ferry terminals, compared to local access to TTC and GO services, it is expected that comparable trips on GO Rail would be 30% to 50% faster, overall, for passengers than the ferry, and that comparable trips on TTC local services would be approximately 10% faster than ferry service. The additional ferry travel time might be compensated for by the appeal of non-stop direct service to and from the downtown which by-passes road congestion, but there would be considerable unreliability associated with ferry operations under poor weather conditions. Overall, it would likely be difficult to attract a significant number of passengers to a ferry service on a consistent basis. Very preliminary ridership forecasts suggest that, at current TTC fare levels, the Humber Bay service might attract up to 1000 passengers per day and the Bluffers Park service 300 per day.

Service operating every 35 minutes from Humber Bay and every 50 minutes from Bluffer's Park would require two vessels on each route. Based on recent Halifax experience, it is expected that a new 350-passenger capacity vessel could be purchased for approximately \$8 million. Including an allowance of \$6 million for the construction of ferry terminals, the total capital cost for a four-ferry operation would be in the order of \$38 million. It may be possible to acquire used vessels at a lower cost, but typically these vessels have higher operating costs which offset the initial capital cost savings. Using representative operating experience in Halifax, adjusted for TTC labour rates, it is estimated that a weekday peak period-only service operating with two vessels would cost in the order of \$6.5 million per year to operate. If four vessels were operated (to provide service from both the east and the west), this cost would double to \$13 million per year.

Using the ridership forecasts presented above, and assuming a standard TTC fare, these costs translate into a net cost, or subsidy requirement, of \$11.50 per passenger-trip from Humber Bay and \$39.00 per passenger-trip from Bluffer’s Park. As noted above, it is unlikely that a significant number of people would pay a large premium fare for the service given the availability of faster, low-cost regular TTC and GO Rail service alternatives.

Further work would be required on a number of significant issues if the concept were to be pursued further. These include:

- planning and design of a downtown ferry terminal in the central waterfront, including involvement of property owners of potential new ferry terminal sites;
- both Humber Bay and Bluffer’s Park are used extensively for recreational activities, and the feasibility and acceptability of constructing and operating a ferry terminal at these locations has not been assessed;
- bus feeder services – particularly to the Bluffer’s Park Terminal – would present operating issues due to the steep grades involved in accessing the park; and
- service feasibility and strategies for a ferry operation in inclement weather and in winter conditions, in particular, remain to be assessed.

In summary,

- fast ferry service appears to offer few, if any, travel time benefits when compared to surface transit travel;
- the appeal of direct, non-stop service to downtown could offset some of the additional travel time involved;
- ferry service could be characterized by a high level of uncertainty and unreliability due to weather conditions that either restrict service or result in service cancellation;
- it is unlikely that passengers would pay a significantly-higher premium fare for the service because faster, lower-cost parallel transit alternatives are already available. For this reason, the service would likely need to be heavily subsidized to attract passengers; and
- there could be community objections to introducing new docks and ferry service in Humber Bay and Bluffer’s Park.

It is unlikely that a successful commuter ferry service could be implemented in Toronto at the present time.

November 26, 2008
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Attachment: *Exhibit 1: Potential Fast Ferry Routes*
Appendix 1: Preliminary Analysis of Fast Ferry Services to Downtown Toronto from Scarborough and Etobicoke, Richard M. Soberman, October, 2008