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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Few people are using the Wikiwiki Ferry; new test route begins in June

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The \$3 million Wikiwiki Ferry demonstration project will begin running on a different route in June as evaluation continues of the hydrofoil's performance, ridership and demographics.

Dean Nakagawa, a planner for the state Department of Transportation, says the existing route from Kalaeloa Barbers Point Harbor to Aloha Tower Marketplace will be tentatively terminated in late May.

The next route, Middle Loch to Pier 9 at Aloha Tower Marketplace, will begin in early June. This will last about two months, followed by the final test route between Iroquois Point and Pier 9.

Meanwhile, a rider says few people are showing up for the ferry commute.

The Transportation Department began the ferry demonstration project Oct. 18 with a 136-passenger, 95-foot, high-speed hydrofoil that travels at about 30 knots but has a maximum speed of more than 40.

The Wikiwiki Ferry has been operating well mechanically, according to the D.O.T., but ridership fares alone cannot support it financially. Initially, the ride was free and a throng of riders jumped aboard. But a \$1.50 fare per trip was instituted Dec. 1, compared with a \$1 fare for TheBus, and ridership decreased dramatically.

Though ridership ebbs and flows, there appears to be some demand for the ferry:

- The number of riders reached a record 393 passengers per week in late October, when the ride was free. But ridership dropped to 120 passengers per week in early December after the \$1.50 one-way fare was instituted.
- The number of riders was impacted significantly in December by the holidays, a police standoff with a gunman in Waianae and rough ocean conditions.
- Ridership grew in January after promotional brochures were distributed, reaching about 170 passengers per week in mid-February. But the passenger count again dropped in mid-March during spring break.

Economic feasibility remains a major question for the demonstration project, as the Wikiwiki Ferry costs \$526 per hour to operate. It now makes two round-trips a day, operating about 10 hours a day, says Eric Schiff, vice president of Navatek Ships Ltd.

That means the ferry costs about \$5,260 per day to run. And during the highest period of paid ridership, Feb. 14-18, fares from 169 passengers amounted to just \$253 for the week.

"There will have to be subsidies," says Nakagawa, adding that state or federal funds could help pay for an ongoing ferry project. He's looking at funding from a federal program, TEA 21, that earmarks money for ferry activities, but he's not sure where state funds would come from.

"There's a lot of interest in the ferry demonstration project," Nakagawa says. "But people have to use it."

People say they'll use the ferry, but the Transportation Department must institute fares to see if they really mean it, he adds.

There is little doubt the hydrofoil is workable in terms of capability.

"It's a technical success," Schiff says.

The ferry had a turbocharger problem in November that was fixed, but it has generally operated trouble-free. The boat will require about a week of maintenance between route changes.

A ferry could run from Oahu to Molokai, Molokai to Maui or even Oahu to Maui, according to Schiff.

The existing hydrofoil can cruise around the neighbor islands. But a craft of 110 feet to 120 feet in length would be needed to better handle the severe ocean conditions that can occur in open water between islands, he says.

Neighbor island trips, however, are not planned at this time. The state's attention is on finishing the demonstration project and evaluating results with ridership and other variables.

Some riders are using the ferry part-time and driving at other times to run errands on the way home from work. Other riders have said they'd like to drink beer on board or be served coffee before boarding. There is a snack bar on the vessel, but its products are limited.

Frills aside, the Transportation Department is concentrating mainly on feasibility, according to Nakagawa.

Michael Mixell, Education America's director of recruiting, is an avid supporter of the ferry. The Makaha resident says he'll follow the ferry to Middle Loch and Iroquois Point just to eliminate the "stop-go-stop-go" traffic on the H-1 freeway. He works in an office building on Bishop Street downtown.

"I come to work refreshed and go home refreshed," he says. "If I never have to drive, it will be too soon."

Mixell says the state has to advertise the program better if it expects more people to use the vessel.

Representatives of the program should visit businesses, talk about the ferry and offer free weeklong trial rides, he says. Lately, only 20 people have been showing up to ride the ferry, he says.

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